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* Slightly Abridged.

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A Selection only.

THERE WAS A CROOKED MAN

BY

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THERE WAS A CROOKED MAN

CHAPTER I

"When first we met I did not guess
That love would prove so hard a master;
Of more than common friendliness
—When first we met I did not guess—
Who could foretell this sore distress,
This irretrievable disaster,
When first we met? I did not guess
That love would prove so hard a master."
—ROBERT BRIDGES

"MY brother—Miss Reeve," said Millicent simply, and then added, "My *eldest* brother, I should have said."

"What a handsome man," Beatrice Reeve thought as she smiled and shook hands. She was beginning to think that the male portion of the Lipscombe family was never-ending, having already made the acquaintance of the Solicitor himself—a grey-haired *paterfamilias*—and two other sons. She had met the youngest, Wilfred, and his sister, Millicent, at a dance in the neighbourhood—hence her introduction to the family. At the time she had thought Wilfred extremely good looking, but he was eclipsed physically by his brother.

She turned with interest to this new member of the family—whom his sisters called Gay—and observed that he was tall and broad-shouldered, pos-

sessed of smooth, dark hair, a pale skin, and large grey eyes with drooping lids. He was unusually graceful for a man, and his manner was somewhat ponderously courteous, but his conversation played mildly about motor-cycles and the weather without engrossing the attention of his listener. Beatrice was disappointed. For all his satisfactory appearance Gay Lipscombe was not so amusing as Wilfred, and she began to wonder why his wife had married him, having been introduced to Mrs. Lipscombe on a former occasion.

On the whole she felt rather glad than otherwise that it was Gabriel who was married, and not Wilfred; the latter was really more entertaining, and his dancing was beyond question. She could see him at a little distance on the tennis-lawn tossing the balls about idly with Ella, a girl of sixteen and the youngest of the family. Wilfred was well built, and his flannels added the grace of ease to his straight young limbs; she had found time to admire his swift movements and animated dark face that afternoon, even while taking the difficult balls he sent her. Wilfred's service was his speciality, and he never spared his opponent, even though it might be a girl who was playing against him. When the game had ended they had adjourned to the trees for tea, which was set out in the shade, and had found that Gabriel Lipscombe junior and his wife had arrived in the interim.

"So now you have made the acquaintance of the whole family?" Gay said rather slowly. He had a deliberate utterance at all times, but just then it almost amounted to hesitation.

Beatrice recalled her wandering glance from Wilfred, and looked up with her bright eyes, wondering at the reservation in his tone.

"Unless there are more of you still to come, I think I have. You have only two sisters, have you?"

"Yes, Millicent and Ella."

"And two brothers?"

"Oh," he said, and there was a note of relief in his voice, "then you have met us all!"

Then Beatrice remembered, and understood the shadow on his face. The second son was a cripple; she had been introduced to him when she first returned Mrs. Lipscombe's call, but in the excitement and interest she had felt over the rest of the household she had passed him by with a vague pity. Even now she could not recall anything about him save that he used crutches, but the sensitiveness which Gay had inadvertently displayed brought the circumstances back to her mind. The cripple must, of course, be more than a shadow to the family, and his misfortune was a grief to them.

"Yes, I have met you all, I think," she said with instinctive readiness. "I feel so envious of Millicent—it must be lovely to have brothers!"

"It means that you get your life tormented out of you generally!" put in Ella with a small grimace. She had come across to the tea-table with Wilfred and overheard the last remark.

Beatrice laughed; she had rather a pretty laugh, and when her lips parted they showed a row of small white teeth.

"I expect they spoil you, too!" she said to the younger girl.

"Ella is bound to be spoilt somehow, being the infant of the family," Wilfred said patronisingly, pulling the curly dark hair which still fell on to Ella's shoulders and was tied back with a ribbon.

She shook her head like an impatient colt, as though she rather resented the touch.

"You are not blessed with brothers, ~~then~~, Miss Reeve?" she said, glancing at Beatrice rather curiously.

"No, I am an only child—there is no one to share the attention with me, so I suppose you think that I am also bound to be spoilt, Mr. Lipscombe?"

Wilfred smiled in a rather tantalising fashion, with a glance at her face which was a mixture of admiration and diffidence. He was quite young enough to have exaggerated the importance of his own good looks, and to think himself generally irresistible, but he had already found Beatrice's wits too quick for him upon occasions, and he dared not risk a compliment and take the chance of a snub with Gay and Ella to witness his discomfiture.

"I will waive the question, Miss Reeve, and make my peace by getting you some tea," he suggested.

Millicent was presiding over the table with the assistance of one Marmaduke Cotterell, a friend of Wilfred's—that is to say, she poured the tea into the cups and he added the milk and sugar, to the accompaniment of intermittent conversation, the consequences being naturally disastrous. Mr. Lipscombe and his wife, who were sitting in easy chairs next the tea-table, had both received their tea exactly as they did not like it, with their taste as to sugar and cream entirely ignored; but, with the long-suffering patience of parents in details of no importance, they were making martyrs of themselves that Millie might not be interrupted.

There was none of the martyr about Wilfred. "Wake up, Millie—Miss Reeve wants some tea," he said. "Two lumps of sugar, Cotterell, and

don't forget the cream. You can pour me out some, too, Millie, and don't make it weak." And the flirtation at the tea-table suffered a rude shock until Wilfred's wants were supplied.

"Here comes Roudy* at last," Millicent remarked as she poured out the second cup with meek care. Wilfred was her boy in particular, and his will was law even when it interfered with her conversation with Duke Cotterell—at present.

Everyone turned and looked at the last comer when Millicent spoke. He was approaching the group at the tea-table slowly, and with evident difficulty, the crutches upon which he supported himself making no sound on the short turf. Had he been like his fellows he would have been a tall man with broad shoulders, but he was slightly deformed as well as crippled, and his humped back detracted from the breadth of them. As Beatrice looked at him, with a new interest sprung of Gay's manner, what struck her most was that the man's whole body was crooked, his long limbs seeming to be twisted all to one side, and the old rhyme occurred to her:

"There was a Crooked Man,
And he went a crooked mile——"

for it seemed literally impossible that he could walk straight. Then she realised sharply and suddenly that they were all standing and watching him while he made his painful progress towards them, as if in silent accentuation of his misfortune. Beatrice flushed up with indignation at herself and the rest of the onlookers, and turned hastily to Gabriel.

"How pretty your youngest sister is!" she said;

* Roudenham is pronounced "Rood'n'am," and Roudy "Roody."

with an irresistible motion of the hand towards Ella to draw his attention in another direction. Ella was out of earshot, but the hunchback was only a few yards distant, and could hear. A curious smile flickered across his lips, and he looked at Beatrice as though he understood the manoeuvre, but he did not attempt to recognise her until she held out her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Lipscombe?" she said. Her smile was a little eager, and her manner a shade warmer than it would have been to anyone who was not so afflicted; but, of course, he could not know that. Only the smile still lingered round his cynical mouth as he stood beside her.

"When did you get down, Roudy?" Millicent asked. "Will you have some tea?"

"Thanks, yes. I came down with my father."

"Beastly hot in town, wasn't it?" Wilfred put in. "I was glad to be shut of the office after lunch."

"That's the advantage of living in a suburb," remarked his father. "One does get some fresh air after the day's work. Have you lived in the neighbourhood long, Miss Reeve?"

"Only for the last twelve months," Beatrice said. Her father was a City man and appreciated getting out to the fresher air after business, much as Mr. Lipscombe did. They liked their house—Trinity Lodge—fairly well, but it was not nearly so pretty as this, The Acacias. As she spoke she looked away down the long garden to the house, which was built of warm red brick, with a tiled roof and casement windows, and she thought how pleasant and peaceful it looked in the afternoon light and how easy life seemed at the present moment. Then her eyes wandered to the hunch-

back, who had settled himself in a chair next his father and taken the tea which Millicent handed to him, and she shivered slightly. To seat himself he had first to lean his crutches against the chair and then lower himself slowly into the seat. No one had offered to help him, and she had made a little impulsive movement which she thought had passed unnoticed before she recollected that she could hardly be so officious as to offer her services. He did not glance at her again, but the smile on his lips broadened.

"We have some large trees here which make the garden pleasant," Mr. Lipscombe said, continuing the conversation. "Won't you sit down, Miss Reeve? I am sure you must be tired after playing tennis all the afternoon."

Five minutes before Beatrice would have declined with thanks, for she knew that Wilfred meant to play again after tea, and he had already moved off to the tennis ground. But Duke Cotterell had placed a chair for her on the other side of the cripple, and she accepted it without any very definite intention, yet knowing that she wanted to talk to him and make half an hour pass pleasantly for him if possible. She was doing it in a missionary spirit, but her motive was quite impersonal.

Mrs. Lipscombe was speaking to him as Beatrice sat down.

"What became of you when you came in, Roudenhams?" she said. "Your father has been out here quite half an hour."

"I went to look up Bogey," he answered. His voice was very pleasant in tone, quite unspoiled by the cynicism which was so wearily written on his face.

"Oh, that was the counter-attraction, was it!

Bogey is my son's Mere-Kat, Miss Reeve. Have you ever seen one?"

"Did you say a cat, Mrs. Lipscombe?" Beatrice asked, puzzled.

"No, a Mere-Kat—it is a South African animal, rather a curious pet to have. Why didn't you bring him out here, Roudy?"

"Bogey is not very polite to strangers," Roudenham said quietly. "He is something like a little ferret," he explained to Beatrice. "And he is apt to bite."

"He is not like an ordinary cat, then?"

"Not at all—to begin with, he spells his name with a K."

It was quite impossible to tell if Roudenham Lipscombe were ironical or no. He spoke with the simplest politeness, and yet for a moment Beatrice wondered uneasily if she ought to laugh. She smiled slightly instead, and said she should hope to make Bogey's acquaintance at some future date.

"Have you been playing tennis?" he asked, without answering her last remark.

"Yes, we have been playing since four o'clock."

"Ah! Wilfred came down early, did he not?" he said. Again Beatrice wondered if he saw any connection between that fact and her presence at The Acacias, or whether he was merely commenting upon the hour when they began to play. She felt slightly dis comforted that she could not tell.

"We were sufficient to make up a set before Mr. Lipscombe came down," she said with intention.

A flash of amusement crossed his face, and he regarded her with a closer scrutiny. All he said, however, was: "You like tennis, of course?"

"Oh, yes! Everybody does, don't they?"

THERE WAS A CROOKED MAN

Then she wished she had not said it, remembering that he could not play.

"My acquaintance with everybody is limited," he said carelessly. "Do they influence you much?"

"Who?"

"Everybody."

"Oh, I meant——" Beatrice began, rather bewildered. Then she paused and laughed. "It did sound as though I had no originality, didn't it?" she said good-humouredly.

"I thought it rather an extensive reason. But I had no right to question your motives at all—particularly when you are being so good and self-sacrificing as to devote yourself to me."

The absolute calmness of the speech made Beatrice gasp. He was not even looking at her, and the uncomfortable colour in her face had time to fade before she spoke.

"I really do not understand you, Mr. Lipscombe. But as you do not seem to appreciate the self-sacrifice which you are good enough to imagine, perhaps I had better devote myself elsewhere."

She got up without another word and walked slowly towards Ella, who was running across the lawn in her direction.

"I was just coming to ask you if you would have another set?" she exclaimed as they met. "Will you play with Wilfred against Millie and Mr. Cotterell?"

"I am afraid I have only time for a game or two. I ought to be getting home," Beatrice said. "But perhaps Mrs. Gabriel Lipscombe would play?"

"Agnes? Oh, yes, I dare say—when you have to leave. I want to talk to Roudy." And Ella

ran away hastily, leaving Beatrice to go on to the tennis court.

"Sooner Ella than I!" she thought. "I don't think I ever came across a more disagreeable man—his temper seems to be as crooked as his body."

After all, neither of the brothers was so nice as Wilfred, she decided. It was curious how she kept on reverting to Wilfred. He was waiting for her in the further court, and as she took her racquet from his hand she smiled at him with recovered appreciation. They were both good players, and they won the set with honours. Beatrice felt reinstated in her own good opinion as she walked back to the group at the tea-table by his side, flushed and triumphant.

"I really must be getting home now," she said. "My mother will wonder what has become of me."

Wilfred wanted to walk home with her, but, as Gay and his wife were going past Trinity Lodge on their way to the station, there was not sufficient excuse and he hesitated to offer. The whole family drifted in the direction of the gate, however, to say good-bye. Beatrice started with Millicent, but Mr. Cotterell was on Millie's other side, and after a few yards Beatrice dropped behind a little. Then she found to her annoyance that she was walking beside Roudenham. It would have been very easy to have got in advance of him again, for his progress was slow and uneven, but Beatrice's kind-heartedness and pity hindered her following her inclination and doing so.

"What a lovely evening it is!" she said gently, half expecting him to pull her obvious speech to pieces as he had done before.

"You have forgiven me, then?" he said quizzically.

cally. "I thought you were not going to speak to me again."

"I see no necessity for being discourteous," she retorted.

"And following my example! I see. Still, I am really sorry I repaid you so ill."

"You take it for granted that it was an infliction," said Beatrice, rather aggravated. "And certainly you did your best to make it so."

"You could not deny the accusation in any case, I am afraid."

"Did you expect me to pay you a compliment, and express my extreme pleasure in your society, Mr. Lipscombe?"

They had reached the gate, and paused as the others had done. Roudy leaned on his crutches and looked at her steadily; Beatrice felt that she was becoming almost self-conscious under the scrutiny.

"Perhaps some day you will be so charitable as to talk to me again—without the charity," he remarked enigmatically as they shook hands. His hands were large and powerful, formed in proportion to his shoulders and his helpless limbs. He would have been taller than Wilfred had his back been straight. He shook hands better than any man she had ever met, Beatrice thought. It was so cordial and friendly that it seemed to indicate a simplicity of nature, and put his odd speeches in a new light as possible bluntness and honesty. She had a woman's facility for jumping to conclusions. So she walked home with Gay and his wife, and said several nice things about Roudenham, frankly though delicately, which made her feel not only generous but just. Gay assented, and looked genuinely pleased; he even enlarged upon the sub-

ject, and appealed to his wife for confirmation once or twice. But Agnes, though she smiled, said nothing.

When they had gone Roudy stood still on the steps for a moment before going into the house. It was a perfect evening in mid-May, and the broad yellow light made earth a suggestion of Paradise. The acacias were greenish-gold in the glory of the sunset which bathed the young leaves in light; it lay warm upon the crimson bricks of the house, and flooded the blue sky with reflected splendour. There is no beautifier like the sunset.

Roudy caught the glow upon his lifted face, and a half-inspired look came over it for the moment. Amongst other drawbacks this victim of ill-fortune possessed the nervous temperament and highly wrought nature which is termed artistic. He was capable of feeling pain or pleasure more intensely than his fellows; a slight annoyance which other men shook off became a cankering sore to Roudy, not only by reason of his physical infirmity, but because of his highly strung nerves. In exact ratio he could, over as slight a cause, attain a delicacy of enjoyment which few men experience. He had that "too much love of living" of which Swinburne says that the gods deprive mortals by excess of pain. It is a capacity for pleasure which generally accompanies strong animal passions; however slight the vitality—however firm the self-restraint—they are still existent, and the more ingrained the instinct, the harder its denial. The sunset this May evening caused Roudy a passing emotion and excitement so keen as to be a pang; had he been a woman he might have found tears in his eyes—being a man he drew a deeper breath than usual, and,

turning his back on the glory, hobbled into the house.

With the atmosphere of everyday life round him the incidents of the afternoon returned to him again, and he smiled as if in malicious memory. There was an elfish strain in Roudy's character that made him love mischief for mischief's sake. He did not enjoy or intend the absolute inflicting of pain—that was not his object—but he could not resist making experiments. As he thought of Beatrice's softened face when she looked at him at the gate he began to smile again; he had so often seen women in love with their own pity, and the humour of it always struck him afresh. It recurred to him again and again during the evening, and each time he shook with silent laughter.

CHAPTER II

"Love is a swallow
 Flitting with Spring;
 Though we would follow,
 Love is a swallow,
 All his vows hollow;
 Then let us sing
 Love is a swallow
 Flitting with Spring."
 —ARTHUR SYMONS

SUNDAY at The Acacias was like a pincushion which has become as full of needles as bran. It is plump and comfortable to look upon, but if you touch it the chances are that you get pricked. The solid Sabbath hours passed with that fat smoothness peculiar to the household of the suburban Englishman, but each member of the family

had a special grievance which poisoned the day's apparent rest and quietness.

Mr. Lipscombe expected to breakfast at nine instead of eight o'clock on Sunday. He was a punctual man, and regular in his business habits all the week, and he regarded the seventh day as literally one of rest. But Millicent attended early service, which began at eight, and said service was choral and somewhat lengthy, therefore she rarely appeared at the breakfast-table until nine-fifteen. Mr. Lipscombe was not so strict in his observance of religion as he was of meals, and he secretly resented people coming in and out during breakfast. However, Millicent was a good girl, with Church of England principles, and she would not for anything short of a domestic scene have given up attending early service—certainly not merely because unpunctuality annoyed her father.

Mrs. Lipscombe was an easy-going woman; she had grown stout through this virtue, and found it necessary to dress more handsomely every year if she were to keep up her dignity. The fatter a woman is, the more necessary it seems for her to wear expensive dress materials. I do not know why, but a fat woman in cheap stuffs is infinitely more unpardonable than a thin woman would be. Mrs. Lipscombe would have preferred to have spent Sunday morning with her husband in the garden, whither the Solicitor always resorted with the Sunday paper after breakfast. She did not see very much of him during the week, and she was of an affectionate though placid temperament. But she found it impossible to forget that she was a mother as well as a wife. Sometimes she lulled her conscience, and delayed the inevitable excursion to church arrayed in hot and handsome garments,

putting off changing her gown by a thousand and one excuses. But evil fate generally decreed that she should meet Millicent just going upstairs to dress, and a pretence of interviewing cook availed her nothing.

"Mother, are you not coming to CHURCH?" Millie would say, with veiled grief in her tones. Millie never mentioned church without capital letters. She was a very good girl.

"Oh, yes, my dear, of course," Mrs. Lipscombe replied meekly. "At least—I am going to see what your father thought of doing."

"Father is in the garden; he is deep in the paper!" said the inexorable young voice. Millicent had given up all hope of reclaiming her father, and resigned herself with pensive certainty to an eternal separation from him at the close of mortal life. She did not regard him as anything but a respectable member of society as far as this world went, but, curiously enough, she made a distinct difference between earthly virtues and heavenly.

"Oh, well, my dear," Mrs. Lipscombe was driven to saying, "I will come with you, of course. I was just thinking of going to dress."

"You will be late if you don't hurry," Millicent said with kindly severity, and Mrs. Lipscombe always ended by following her upstairs and hooking herself into a tight and rustling gown in which she kept up the family dignity in a pew for which Gabriel Lipscombe paid, but which he did not use. The service always had the effect of making her feel her own salvation in attending it so strongly that she wanted to impress a like virtue upon the rest of the family, and irritated Wilfred and Ella into temporary atheism by waxing sentimental over religion at the dinner-table. Ella grew to associate

certain psalms with roast mutton—that being the regular Sunday dinner at The Acacias—for her mother had a habit of quoting them while she dropped quiet tears into the gravy. The Lipscombes dined in the middle of the day on Sunday, for the only time during the week, and supper was an hour later than their usual meal, under a general fallacy that somebody would attend evening service. This alone was enough to upset their digestions and tempers.

The effect of the two services which she had attended was not obviously improving to Millicent at dinner-time; she was inclined to adopt a belligerent tone, and to reform the whole family between the courses. Wilfred thereupon contradicted her and loudly announced his own right of opinion, seeming to think that reiterated assertion was argument. On these occasions only Ella backed him up stoutly and agreed with him, for she was in general at variance with her youngest brother, and the end of the meal was a relief to everybody, if the argument were not so heated that it continued down the passage and into the drawing-room. Mrs. Lipscombe would glance with mild reproach at the combatants, and endeavour to catch her husband's eye, and remark: "Now, my dear, don't you think it is time——," which welcome signal was hailed by the more peace-loving of the family; but by that time Millie was really injured at "Wilfred's objectionable and silly way of speaking," and Wilfred had grown so explosive that he had to smoke several cigarettes before he calmed down enough to go and call upon his friends in the neighbourhood.

Millicent always slept on Sunday afternoon; it was a cat-sleep which ended with the least sus-

picion of the front-door bell, and left her time to arrange her hair before the maid opened the door, otherwise she dozed peacefully until tea time. In the evening she went to church again—unless someone called. Then she stayed at home and arranged it with her conscience by the explanation that mother could not be left to entertain visitors all alone, and Ella was a child.

Ella, as a fact, was over sixteen; she had only returned home from Switzerland, where she had been at school, six months before, and had barely found her niche in the family as yet. Hitherto her sojourns with them in the holidays had somewhat resembled visits; she had been more of a guest than one of the household, and she found many things to put up with in her new position. She was so much alive in her intense youth that she was rather a restive element amongst her relations, who had grown used to placid womankind in Mrs. Lipscombe and Millicent. Ella resembled Wilfred in her energetic individuality; but whereas Wilfred had the outside interests of a young man, Ella was driven into the family groove and her superfluous vitality had no outlet.

Roudenham passed his Sunday as far removed from his family as possible. By his own choice his room was at the top of the house, whither there was a long and difficult climb for his handicapped limbs; but he preferred the long, low room under the roof to one on the ground floor which he might have had, and regularly toiled up and down to his sanctum between meals. As soon as he opened his door there came a patter of soft feet—an uneven patter like a little lame dog's—and then a thick body rubbing against his foot. This was Bogey, the Mere-Kat, whose cage stood in the passage

outside, but who spent most of the day amongst Roudy's belongings. He was something like a ferret in appearance, with broad, flat hindquarters, on which he sat up like a miniature kangaroo. His head was flat, with a long tapering nose, as keen after scent as a bloodhound's and as delicate and mobile as an ant-eater's; he had beautiful dark eyes, which closed like a bird's when he slept, the under-lids covering the pupils instead of the upper, and a long jaw with vicious white teeth which could bite through a thick glove. Like his master he was lame, and perhaps on this account he would allow no strange hand to touch him, for he had been roughly handled in the trapping. Roudy used to pick him up by the scruff of the neck and put him on his shoulder, where the animal would sit up as if on the look-out, uttering the soft crooning noise peculiar to his tribe. They were a strange couple.

The Sunday after Beatrice Reeve had played tennis at The Acacias her name came up at the breakfast-table, and Mr. Lipscombe expressed his opinion of her.

"I like that Miss Reeve of yours, Millie," he said. "She's a nice bright little girl."

"Gay said he thought her pretty," remarked Mrs. Lipscombe placidly. Her eldest son's verdict weighed with her. "I should hardly have said that myself, but it is an attractive face, I admit."

"She's a smart little girl—always looks well-groomed," put in Wilfred with lordly approval. His youth betrayed him into patronising unmarried girls and cultivating an admiration for young married women.

"Is she a particular friend of yours, Wil?"

Roudy asked, looking steadily across the table at his brother.

"Not especially," Wilfred replied, with elaborate indifference. "No, I like her very well—she's just a nice little girl to dance with and talk to."

"I see. Then if—Cotterell cuts you out, you won't feel that your life is ruined?"

"Old Duke? He has about as much intention of marrying as I have. But he is quite welcome, if Miss Reeve likes him."

Wilfred spoke with superb condescension, feeling so very sure in his inmost mind that Beatrice infinitely preferred him to Duke Cotterell. Roudy contemplated him with an air of interest, as if he found him transparent and could see the wall behind him.

"I think you might allow Beatrice a voice in the matter before disposing of her like this!" Millicent put in with some annoyance in her voice.

"So we might," Roudy agreed amicably, as he reached his hand for his crutches and dragged himself up from the table. "Miss Reeve's unbiassed choice might perhaps be a revelation to us."

He began to laugh in his noiseless fashion, and he was still laughing when he reached his own room, and Bogey climbed up on his knee to peer into his face as though he would like to share the joke.

Ella followed after a few minutes. When she felt the necessity for expatiating on her wrongs she generally invaded Roudy's privacy and talked herself into a better frame of mind. It was not so much that she found him sympathetic as that she loved him; Ella would rather go to Roudy, however unresponsive he might be, than to the rest of the family, about whom she cared less. Her reasons

for her preference were known only to herself—and perhaps Bogey.

Roudenham knew who it was before he said "You can come in," in answer to her knock.

Ella wandered about the room without announcing what she had come for at first. Her brother was sitting at his table, engaged on a model of a motor engine and some draughtman's designs for improvements. His hobby was engineering, and he worked at the perfecting of certain details with a terrible patience. It was not likely, if he ever completed his invention and patented it, that anyone would take it up, but his philosophy caused him to do for the sake of doing, regardless of any ultimate result.

"Still working at that piston-ring?" Ella asked.

She was looking out of the window which looked towards the east; the room was a narrow one, but it ran the whole length of the house, with a window at each end. The west window had the wider view, for at the east the prospect was chiefly green leaves; but when the sun shone it came in during the whole day on one side or other.

Roudy did not trouble to reply, and Ella began to talk herself into calmness as usual.

"I wish Millie would let my salvation alone. I don't want to go to church."

"Then don't go," said Roudy quietly.

"But mother will be unhappy if I make a fuss and insist on stopping at home."

"Oh, then do go."

For a second Ella flashed an indignant glance at him. Then her face cleared, as a May sky does after rain. She laughed.

"How aggravating you are, Roudy! But it is hateful going to church here. It was beautiful

abroad when we went to the Catholic churches—all lights and music and incense and beautiful things. But here they keep one eye on the service and the other on the lookout for the people they know. How on earth can Millie tell if Mrs. Reeve is in church or that Miss Green drops her prayer-book in the middle of the Litany? I don't attend to the service much because it is so dull, but I never see anyone round me."

Roudy's mouth twitched. "You're young, you see," he said. "A mere novice in church-going. When you have been at it for some years, and have attended many hundreds of services, you will find it quite easy to follow the Rubric and your neighbours' backslidings at the same time."

"Shall I? I wonder! Bogey-kat, come and say good morning to me."

She sat down on the floor, and the Mere-Kat jumped into her lap and snapped at her. "Oof!" Ella said, and began a game of play which would have looked horribly dangerous to anyone unacquainted with Bogey's ways. Five minutes later she jumped up without a cloud on her face.

"I must go and dress for church," she said with a grimace. She paused beside her brother's chair and put her arm around his neck softly. "Do you know, Roudy, I'm awfully fond of you," she said, with apparent irrelevance.

"I am not at all surprised to hear it. Most young animals are," he returned; but after she had gone he abandoned his model for ten minutes and leaned his head on his hands thinking.

Ella went to church, and endured an extra prayer (for the clergy) and the Litany, to which an untoward fate doomed her. She found it impossible to fix her attention during the innumerable com-

missions for the Delfy to which the congregation solemnly subscribed, and her thoughts wandered away to past Sundays at Vevey, and a thousand and one aspirations which had no connection with the service. She could hear Millicent's devout responses breathed softly beside her, and they made a running accompaniment to her thoughts; but they did not urge her to greater attention, for she knew that Millicent's devotions were something like this:

"Good Lord, deliver us!"

("Mrs. Beamings is at home again—she is sure to come and call next Wednesday. What a bore!")

"We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord!"

("May Selwyn has got an ostrich boa exactly the shade I want. If only Aunt Feodore gives me some money this quarter I can have one, too. I do hope she will!")

"O Lord, hear us!"

("And let Duke Cotterell come in to tea this afternoon!")

Ella's inattention was due to a primary cause. All her hopes, interests, and schemes centred at one point at this period of her life, and she pursued her object with characteristic intensity. Ella was stage-struck. How girls first catch this ailment is not very certain, but it is a passion more likely to become chronic than any other. Among Ella's schoolmates was the daughter of an artist, who mingled with the Bohemian world somewhat largely whenever she went home for the holidays, and poured into Ella's thirsty ears tales and anecdotes and personal encounters that made her sad with longing. How she envied Jessie in her artistic home at Chelsea, where actors and artists and writers, known and unknown, came and went like

ordinary mortals! Jessie's father was a rich man for his class; he gave Sunday evening suppers, and brought his friends home from the Savage Club at a late hour to partake of irregular meals, which had to be ready at any moment. Sunday was a great day for the Profession, Ella knew. After the tedious morning service and the orderly middle-day dinner with its attendant bickerings, Ella betook herself to her own room and, throwing wide her window, turned her face to the east where lay the great City, and fancied that the deep sound of its never-ceasing murmur floated to her yearning ears across the young green of the acacia trees. The throbbing restless life in her made it impossible to sit quietly and read; she dreamed and invented, going over her stage life as she fancied it, thrilling with imaginary success, and earnestly planning real artistic effort and work. She did not shrink from the idea of drudgery; she was sensible enough to realise that it is by no means all applause and excitement; but she felt, as one never feels save at sixteen, that she would gladly face any drawbacks if she might but do the work for which she imagined herself fitted, and live the life she wanted to. There is something terrible about the desires of the very young—they are as intense as a religion and more devotional than a great passion.

Of course, her people knew next to nothing about her aspiration; if they had, they would hardly have taken it seriously. There was a vague impression in the household that Ella was very interested in theatrical things, and it was generally humoured as a kind of joke. When Wilfred went to the theatre he always tossed the programme on to her plate the next morning, with a "Here, Baby, I suppose you would like to see that." And Mrs. Lipscombe

was dimly aware that Ella knew a great deal about the Stage, and thought it rather a foolish fancy of which she would be glad to hear the last. They would have been seriously disturbed if they had realised what a little volcano was bubbling in their midst, or if they had known the extent to which Ella's "fancy" had grown. She had confided her aspirations towards the Stage to no one at present—not even to Roudy—but she secretly fanned her determination with every breath from that longed-for world which passed her way.

Mr. Cotterell did come to tea, so perhaps Millie's inaudible additions to the Litany carried weight with Providence. Ella watched him walk up to the hall door—her room being in the front of the house—and criticised him disgustingly as a hopelessly ordinary young man. His broad shoulders and athletic limbs weighed nothing with her; he had a brown moustache and cropped his hair closely, for he had joined the Territorials. She wondered how Millie could find any interest in his conversation, which was chiefly concerned with local cricket matches and suchlike.

"I needn't go down to see *him!*" she thought with relief, turning over the leaves of her album to refresh herself with a sight of Mr. Gerald Du Maurier, after Duke Cotterell. Ella's album was a guarded treasure; it was full of celebrities—theatrical, of course—and she spent most of her pocket-money in adding to it.

"I think Roudy is rather like that," she thought, turning the pages slowly. Only her own fond fancy could in any probability have discovered the likeness, but to her eyes it was patent.

A minute later the garden gate shut again, and Beatrice Reeve walked up to the hall door.

"Now I *must* go down," thought Ella discontentedly. "What a bore! I wish these horrible, uninteresting people wouldn't come."

She shut Mr. Du Maurier away from her regretful sight, and went down to pour out tea and listen with apparent interest to the small-talk accompanying it. Mr. Lipscombe rarely appeared at tea-time, as he took the opportunity afforded by Sunday of going to see his only sister, Madame Le Marchant, who had established herself and her grey parrot in a flat at Battersea when her husband died and she found herself forced to leave Paris. She was as British by birth as her brother, but she seemed to have caught a spice of wit and brightness from the clearer atmosphere of France, and she was an amusing companion. Gabriel Lipscombe rarely missed his Sunday visits to her.

Wilfred was generally the only male member of the family who took tea and helped to entertain chance visitors; he was talking to Beatrice when Ella took the tea-making off Millicent's hands, and left her free to annex Duke Cotterell. Five minutes later Ella paused, teapot in air, and turned her head like an intelligent terrier. She had caught a sound she knew, and though it was unusual she could not mistake it—it was the sharp click of Roudy's crutches coming down the passage, and a minute later he opened the door and came in.

He shook hands with Cotterell and sat down beside Beatrice. Wilfred was talking to her at the moment, and she continued the conversation, but after a time she contrived to include Roudy by turning her head and saying, "Don't you think so?" after an assertion of her own. He smiled, but did not answer. Perhaps he was afraid of being an unwelcome interruption, Beatrice thought

quickly. Poor fellow! It seemed hard always to leave him out. No wonder that he had become so soured and sensitive if anyone did attempt to talk to him. She turned away from Wilfred, and addressed him pointedly; he answered, with a slight quiver of his lips which was almost a smile. Beatrice determined that it should become one absolutely, and persisted more earnestly in her effort to talk to him; he was not responsive at first, though quite gently courteous, but she was not to be repulsed now. After a few minutes Wilfred found that he had dropped out of the conversation; it did not disturb him—it being only Roudy who had ousted him—but he strolled over to the piano until the subject should have exhausted itself, when Beatrice would, of course, look round for him.

Half an hour later Beatrice got up to leave; neither she nor Roudy had altered their positions during that time, and though Mrs. Lipscombe and Millicent had occasionally chimed in, they had really been talking to each other. Wilfred felt a little injured without quite knowing why; there was no smile on his face as he hesitated whether he would walk down to the gate with Miss Reeve. Roudy reached after his crutches as Beatrice shook hands with him, then abandoned the attempt, and looked up in quiet apology. "Please don't!" she said, quickly. She was so sorry at the moment that she flushed warmly, and her eyes looked down on him full of tenderness. She had almost forgotten that he was not like other men when talking to him, and it seemed so terrible that he should have to remind her of it. Possibly Roudy knew this.

The flush and the tenderness had not quite faded when she reached Wilfred in her farewells. They were unconscious attractions, and she was really

absent-minded as she smiled half-regretfully at his reproachful face. The regret was not for him, but he instantly decided to accompany her as far as the gate at least—if not farther.

"Roudy," Ella said suddenly, after they left the room, "when you tilt your chin up like that and smile very gradually, you look like an extremely wise devil who sees the utter idiocy of every human being in the world!"

"My dear Ella!" said Mrs. Lipscombe.

CHAPTER III

"Love is a stupid game—
 Nobody knows the rules.
 Wisdom declares the same—
 'Love is a stupid game!'
 If you would victory claim
 Play with—a pack of fools!
 Love is a *stupid* game—
 Nobody knows the rules!"

—MAY BATEMAN

GABRIEL Lipscombe, junior, lived at Surbiton. He was an eminently satisfactory young man in most ways, with an amiable weakness where clothes were concerned. He had more suits than one man in ten in the same position, and his wife used to declare that Gay required more wardrobes and cupboards for his clothes than she did for hers. However, he looked very nice in them, so his family tried to comfort themselves for the inevitable cost.

It had been taken for granted that Gay would study law and be taken into his father's firm as partner, but he evinced such a distaste for the profession that he was eventually stowed away into

a Government office, where he tranquilly settled down and was regarded as a very creditable ornament to the institution. Gay was not only goodly to look upon, but he had an undeniable manner; it forced a contrast to other men who otherwise would have passed as decent fellows enough, and caused those with whom he came in contact to say vaguely, "Oh, Lipscombe is a gentleman!" with a sudden revelation that perhaps a good many of his fellows were not. After a while he fell in love—very gracefully and solemnly—with the daughter of his father's partner, and married her, which was pleasant and comfortable for everybody.

Agnes Verrinder possessed a large sense of humour and the virtue of tact. She was on good terms with all the diverse members of her husband's family, and, considering that they all confided in her in turn, it was the more marvellous. Gay had been married about a year when Ella first came home from school; he represented a pleasant acquaintance more than anything else to her, and she regarded his house as one of the most agreeable that she ever visited. Besides, she was very fond of the river. Gay and Agnes had a charitable habit of making up family parties on the water, with the addition of the outside element which each member most desired. It caused them to be deservedly loved by their relations, for while there is nothing so conducive to war and bloodshed as a gathering which is confined to members of one family, an outside element, be it never so intimate, leavens the whole lump and seems to sow charity even among relations.

They got up one of these informal picnics at the beginning of June. It was a warm month that

year, and they did not attempt to get on to the water until four o'clock; but Ella and Millicent went over to lunch, and helped to pack the hampers with provisions enough to stock a fortress. Gay came down by an early train and Duke Cotterell joined them at the boathouse. Agnes had been disappointed of the girl she had invited to talk to Wilfred, but he was in a good temper and seemed perfectly contented with Gay and herself. Wilfred was articled clerk to his father in Gay's stead, but he was one of those young men who are always managing to obtain the half-day off from work, and he left Lincoln's Inn early and came down almost as soon as Gay, looking like a modern edition of Adonis in his flannels. They started in two boats, Gay and Wilfred sculling the one, and Duke Cotterell in the other with Millicent to steer. Agnes took the lines in the bigger boat, and Ella lay full-length up in the bow behind the men. This was her favourite position—to be out of everybody's way, not forced to talk, with the rhythmical thud of the sculls turning in the rowlocks and the forward swing of the boat to keep time to her enjoyment. Lap! lap! went the water against the keel, and the low river banks glided by in the golden sunshine like a moving panorama. Ella could have sung for pure pleasure; she was a very receptive little person.

"I think we must bring Aunt Feodore up river one day," Wilfred said, laughing, as a boat-load passed them with several children and one elderly lady looking very uncertain in the stern. "That old lady put me in mind of her. Wouldn't she enjoy herself!"

"I can't think why those sort of people ever go on the water," said Gay, regarding the children

and their protector with his customary gravity. "It is just as absurd as if they went up in an aeroplane."

"And she will come in a large hat with a green veil round it, and make Gay ill! He will never be respected on the river again," continued Wilfred, with unholy joy. "I must certainly persuade her to come."

"It is so difficult to provide a suitable headgear for elderly ladies on the water," Agnes put in, in her soft voice. "There is something quite ludicrous in their usual trimmed hats, and yet what are they to do? Plain straw is out of the question."

"It is not so bad as an elderly gentleman in a top hat and with a large umbrella, though. I saw that one day when we were listening to the band. There wasn't the least sun, so I suppose he was trying to hide his hat."

"I wish Roudy could have come!" Ella said suddenly, with an irrelevancy born of her pleasure.

"So do I," Agnes agreed cordially. "We must try and persuade him some day. Do you think he would like it, Ella?"

"He would love it—only he wouldn't come."

"Poor old chap!" Wilfred said briefly, straightening his own back as if in sudden memory.

Roudy had, as a fact, forgotten that all the family, save his father and mother, would be up river this afternoon. He left Mr. Lipscombe in town, the solicitor having business outside Lincoln's Inn after he left the office. Roudy was his father's secretary; it had been deemed impossible to article him like Gay or Wilfred. There were days which were all pain for Roudenham—days when he was literally laid on his back, for the root of his disease was in the spine. But when he was well enough

he worked considerably more than Wilfred, having fewer distractions, and he knew almost as much of the business of the firm as his father did. His infirmity forced him to accompany the solicitor as a rule, for he was slow in getting in and out of trains and vehicles of any sort, but he occasionally came home alone. Mr. Lipscombe was a respected member of society, and no breath of blame rested on his reputation, but he had his experiences. He had never hinted a word of them to either Gay or Wilfred—Gay was too unintentionally sober and respectable to invite confidences and Wilfred was sufficiently rapid on his own account. But Roudy and his father understood each other without absolute explanations. Gabriel Lipscombe thought in his heart that his second son was neither a fool nor a saint, and he found it a great convenience. What was more, Roudy knew the byways as well as the highways of the clients, and he did not make mistakes.

The firm of Lipscombe and Verrinder managed all the affairs of a certain noble family, and had done for three generations—ever since Gabriel Lipscombe's grandfather had entered the law. There existed that kind of friendship between the client and the head of the firm which does occasionally get handed down with other traditions of the family. Arthur Celtic Serle, the present Earl of Roudenham, was a few years younger than Gabriel Lipscombe, but they had been friends as young men, the somewhat limited capacity of the young nobleman instinctively recognising a greater power and brilliance in the solicitor. "Lipscombe ought to have been a politician—he would have made his mark," Lord Roudenham was fond of saying, dimly conscious that he himself lacked the qualities

he discerned. Arthur Serle, then Viscount Ainsworth, had been at college when the solicitor married, at which time Gabriel Lipscombe was only a younger partner in the firm, but he renewed the friendship on leaving Oxford a year or two later and stood godfather to the second son. There was an unacknowledged regret in the minds of both parents that he had not been sponsor to Gay, then a beautiful, healthy child of two, rather than to the sickly, stunted baby who was never expected to reach manhood. But Roudenham had proved these cheerful prognostications false, as he had proved many others, and at two-and-thirty there was plenty of hope that he would live for many years, said the doctors, though the chances were against him. But, of course, the opportunities he might have had from his godfather were thrown away on him, and beyond giving him a handsomer silver cup than his brothers and sending him "tips" on his birthday as long as he was a boy, Lord Roudenham could do but little for him.

When Roudy reached The Acacias and found that the family in general had gone out he made his way up to his own room and sat down to his model. Bogey came and investigated his work at intervals, or sat bolt upright on his hindquarters in the sunshine, looking for all the world like a small fur-clad demon. The pit-pat of his sinewy little feet sounded busily about the room from time to time; Roudy seemed to know instinctively when his restless claws were getting him into mischief, and without turning his head would call "Bogey!" at which the animal obeyed him like a dog and came scampering across the room to report himself.

Roudy had been up there half an hour when there came an unusual knock at his door, and one of the

servants brought him a message—Miss Reeve was here and tea was ready. Mrs. Lipscombe wanted to know if he would like it sent up, or would he come down?

"Oh," said Roudy thoughtfully, "I think I'll come down."

As the maid disappeared again he whistled for his pet, who came up to him and lowered his head for Roudy to get hold of the scruff of his neck.

"Bogey," said Roudenham thoughtfully, placing the little beast on his knees and dodging the snap with which he was rewarded, "if a very nice, pretty little lady Mere-Kat came up to you and—and made advances, what would you do?"

"Catchy—catchy—catchy——!" said Bogey, chattering with rage because he could not get hold of Roudy's fingers.

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, then, you would be very ungentlemanly—which I couldn't think of being."

He put Bogey on the floor again, and went downstairs to tea.

Beatrice had called in because she was passing, and wanted to know if Millicent would play tennis with her one day this week—this she explained to Mrs. Lipscombe, and she did not add that The Acacias grew fuller of interest every time she came there, because this was a point that remained unacknowledged even to herself as yet, a formless fact at the back of her mind which she did not choose to investigate. She was sorry they were all out, but very glad to share Mrs. Lipscombe's solitude—and she became yet more glad presently when Mrs. Lipscombe began to talk of her family. She talked fluently on this subject, for it was one which she had really devoted herself to studying; every

slight characteristic or trait of her children she had taken carefully into consideration, and formed her own opinion thereon, rather narrowly, perhaps, but with the unconscious pathos of mothers who have merged their own existence in that of their families. She knew less about her husband than she did about her children, her knowledge of him being confined to his favourite dishes and the little fads which beset all men. She could not read what was passing in his mind, nor guess the line of thought he would take on a given subject, as she could in the case of Wilfred or Millicent or even Gay, partly because his intellect was wider than hers, and long ago he had outrun her capacity and left her contentedly behind, and partly because the deepest emotions of her nature were with her children rather than her husband. To anyone in the least interested in them she must have been interesting herself when she talked of them, from her perfect acquaintance with her subject and absorption in it. Beatrice was interested, and unintentionally encouraged Mrs. Lipscombe to discuss them and retail anecdotes, trivial enough, but illustrating their characters vividly.

Roudy found that tea was going on in the conservatory, and that Miss Reeve was sitting with a teacup in one hand and a book of photographs—family photographs—on her knee. The glass doors were open, and as he crossed the drawing-room he heard his mother say: "He is really the cleverest of them all—he can do anything upon which he sets his mind."

Roudy smiled obscurely; he knew that she was speaking of him, and with the instinct of motherhood she was extolling his mental advantages in default of physical. He knocked his crutch against a chair—it was a slight sound, but it prevented his

walking into the middle of a list of his own virtues—and then he limped in with a perfectly unconscious face.

Beatrice had not taken into calculation that when Mrs. Lipscombe said they were all up river she had not probably included Roudy. She was startled, and a good deal pleased, but she did not betray it.

"I have been looking at the family portrait gallery, Mr. Lipscombe," she said, as he sat down beside her in his inevitably careful fashion.

Roudy bent over her lap to look at a faded likeness of his eldest brother in a frilled white frock and obviously unnatural curls. Gay was depicted on a chair with his toes very carefully turned out and one hand grasping a toy in which he did not seem to feel any interest.

"The horse and cart with the small boy is as inevitable as the basket of flowers with the debutante," remarked Roudy. "Is that ugly baby Ella? I wonder she has not secretly destroyed such a libel on herself long since. Have you ever noticed, Miss Reeve, how humiliating it is to come on any memento of one's past self? Old letters and old likenesses are among the most discouraging things I know."

"How if they are flattering likenesses?" said Beatrice, turning the leaves of the book idly.

"Well, that would be worse still, to find that one had deteriorated. This book is most instructive, though—do look at that portrait of Wilfred and Millie; Wilfred, you observe, though much the smaller, has taken all the chair and most of the little dog—is that object that they are torturing a dog?"

"No, it is a Noah's Ark, I think. Oh, here is your eldest brother as a schoolboy in a nice white turned-down collar—how funny! And——"

They both paused simultaneously at a likeness of Roudenham himself, the solitary specimen among the collection. Only the head was taken, the poor maimed body being left mercifully unrecorded, but the pain of his infirmity was plainly written on the child's face. Beatrice realised for the first time that the stamp of suffering, peculiar to deformed people, was set on Roudy also. She did not look at him, but he looked at her, and saw the tenderness and regret come into her face again.

"Here is the later album," Mrs. Lipscombe broke in in placid interruption, placing another book over the one Beatrice held. "That is Gay, taken just before his marriage, and there is the last of Ella."

"What a good likeness!" said Beatrice, recovering herself. "And who is this, Mrs. Lipscombe?"

"That? Let me look—oh, that is Roudy's particular friend. He is an engineer, and is out in South Africa now. It was he who presented us with the Mere-Kat. But there is a later one somewhere—Roudy, isn't there a later one of Mack?"

Beatrice was looking in wonder at the portrait before her, trying to discover the link between this big fair man and Roudenham. She did not realise that the quality of strength is more patently stamped upon a face when you see only the counterfeit presentment, without the distraction of personal intercourse; had she come on a contemporary likeness of Roudy she might perhaps have caught a possible connection, but even that is unlikely, because he was at that moment still leaning over her shoulder.

"Mack is a good sort," he said briefly.

"How is Bogey? You have never shown him to me yet," she said.

"No," he replied deliberately. "He sent you

his love, but he is of a jealous nature, and cannot bear me to talk to anyone else when he is present—therefore he said he thought he had better stay upstairs!”

“Oh!” said Beatrice, laughing. “But you could have talked to Bogey!”

“He also said,” went on Roudy, thoughtfully, “that he thought I was behaving very badly.”

Beatrice opened her bright eyes. “Why?” she asked curiously.

“For coming down to tea instead of having it with him, of course,” Roudy answered, and something in his voice was giving quite a different explanation which Beatrice did not translate.

“I wonder when Mack will come home again,” Mrs. Lipscombe said in her pleasant level tones; she was given to abstract speculations with no particular end in view. “Dear me! Shall I ever forget the time when he stayed here, and you were always up in that top room together, the whole place smelling of oil and hot metals! Mack seemed to be for ever making models of engines in his shirt sleeves—I am sure I don’t know why he took his coat off to do it.”

“Perhaps because of the oil and hot metal,” remarked Roudy drily. “He was generally employed in pulling my models to pieces, though, rather than in making new ones, and in demonstrating to me the utter futility of a theorist attempting to improve upon a machine which practical men had found imperfect.”

“Is machinery another of your hobbies, Mr. Lipscombe?” Beatrice said.

“Oh, Roudy is always inventing something or other!” Mrs. Lipscombe replied, with an innocent pride that made Roudy’s lips twitch. His mother was very fond of airing his accomplishments, he

knew, and when he was present he usually suppressed her quietly before she could expatiate further. He sometimes wondered how she blazoned him behind his back, for it was second nature to her to idealise and misrepresent the human beings to whom she was nearest. Had Roudy chosen he might have been the pivot on which the whole household turned, the first consideration in every respect, and an invalid who was waited on hand and foot. His sense of the ludicrous had prevented his taking advantage of his own weakness, and so his mother merely petted him as much as he would let her, and Millicent and Wilfred were really more indulged. He had preferred to stand alone, the power in him forcing his decision to be accepted, and stand alone he did, his mother suffering in silence some jealous pain at the least fancied slight to him. She had a secret desire always to make the best of Roudy, in spite of himself.

In the present case he acted contrary to his usual habit and strolled away at the beginning of her account of his talents, leaving her a free field. He had his reasons, and while he instructed the gardener to cut some early roses for Miss Reeve, he thought with a malicious smile that she was probably learning that he was an embryo Edison.

"I went to The Acacias this afternoon," Beatrice said to her mother that evening. Mrs. Reeve was an invalid who rarely left her sofa; she was thankful for Beatrice to have friends in the neighbourhood.

"Did you see Millicent?" she asked.

"No; they were all up river except Mrs. Lipscombe and the second son—the one that is a cripple."

"Ah, poor fellow!" said Mrs. Reeve compassionately. "So terrible for them, isn't it!"

"They don't seem to feel it so—indeed, they are

very proud of him. He is exceedingly clever," Beatrice asserted quickly. Somehow her mother's commiserating tone jarred on her a little—she felt aggravated, and as if she wanted to prove to the world that Roudenham Lipscombe's mental superiority outweighed his physical disadvantages.

"Still it must be a terrible trial, and a great anxiety. Those poor deformed creatures are never long-lived!"

Beatrice sprang up with her face aflame. "Really, mother, you might be a bird of ill-omen!" she exclaimed. "There is no reason why he should not live for years, and pass his life quite like other men—no reason at all!"

And she went to the piano and began to play one of Chopin's waltzes rather loudly and unevenly, for her hands were not quite steady. Mrs. Reeve looked mildly pained—she could not bear noise, and Beatrice was rendering that *adagio* passage in a most terrible manner!

CHAPTER IV

"We heed not the sound of our Life's swift feet
Pass the Future's gate;
The careless word that I heard in the street—
The name that I do not mark or repeat—
Is my tragic fate."

"I HAVE had a letter from Feodore," Mrs. Lipscombe said next morning. "She is coming over to tea this afternoon."

Feodore was Madame Le Marchant, Mr. Lipscombe's sister. He glanced up with some interest at the mention of her name.

"Oh!" he said. "I will try and get down early."

"I was speaking of her only yesterday," remarked Wilfred lazily. "See how soon we hear her wings! I was suggesting to Gay," he went on, "that we should take her up river with us. Poor old Gay! He was too polite to negative it, but he looked troubled for a long time afterwards."

"How glorious it was yesterday!" Ella said, looking up from her breakfast with a flash of memory in her eyes. The reflection of the sunlit river still seemed to linger there. "I wish you had been with us, Roudy."

"Thank you," said Roudenham quietly.

"We had a visitor of our own," Mrs. Lipscombe reminded her. "I was so sorry you were all out."

"Miss Reeve wasn't sorry," said Roudy coolly. "She enjoyed herself immensely looking at the family archives." Which sounded such a palpable absurdity on the face of it that no one dreamed of taking it seriously.

"She was very much interested in Mack," asserted Mrs. Lipscombe, who had a curious faculty for building erroneous conclusions upon the merest incidents, and speaking of them as proven facts. "She liked his face so much. I was showing her his photo."

A faint amusement dawned in Roudy's eyes, and the imp of mischief which haunted them became quite visible if anyone had observed him.

"Mack isn't a bad-looking fellow," Wilfred said, but his tone was depreciatory. "I don't think Beatrice Reeve would think much of him if she saw him in reality, though. That photo flatters him." Wilfred was somewhat transparent.

"Do you think so, my dear?" said Mrs. Lips-

combe unconsciously, to Roudy's huge delight. "I think him such a good-looking man—he is so thoroughly manly."

"I don't think that would weigh with Beatrice," put in Millicent in a slightly reproving tone, as if there were something rather disgraceful in obvious masculinity.

"Girls of Miss Reeve's age rarely think anything of a man under thirty," Roudy said—with intention.

"How silly you are, Roudy!" Ella remarked, laughing at him across the table. She was the only one who had recognised the imp of mischief. "I can't bear you when you are in that mood."

Roudy smiled back at her. "I think I shall let Mack have Ella—when she begins to think of growing up," he said sweetly. "At present she lives too much in superlatives. She never dislikes anything—she simply 'can't bear it,' and if anything attracts her she always 'adores' it."

This was so true that everyone laughed, Ella included.

"I shan't adore your hateful Mack," she said defiantly. "And he can't have me because—because I have got other fish to fry," with a mental glance at the footlights glaring across her future. "Besides, I believe he is married—or if he isn't now he is sure to have a squaw and a wigwam somewhere by then."

"What has that got to do with it?"

Ella looked rather taken aback. "Oh," she said vaguely, "I think I will wait until I meet him in future ages to explain. As I have not the pleasure of his personal acquaintance it doesn't matter either way." Then she let fly a last shaft

as Roudy left the table. "I didn't know that your friends were Eastern in their views!" she said.

"We are all Eastern by nature and Western by a mistaken education," said Roudy placidly.

The meaning of Roudenham's speeches did not always dawn upon Millicent at the time he made them, but they sometimes recurred to her afterwards and made her uneasy. An instinct of self-preservation prevented her ever entering into explanations with him, but she waged an irregular warfare by trying to warn the rest of the household of his evil proclivities.

"I think if I were you," she said to Ella some hours later, "that I would not talk nonsense to Roudy, or encourage him to talk it to me. Of course, young men have a silly habit of saying things they don't mean sometimes, but Mack is really a nice fellow, and I am sure he would not like Roudenham speaking of him like that." Millicent was becoming somewhat vague in her efforts after propriety. "Of course, there is no harm in it—but I shouldn't talk to Roudenham about him if I were you."

A rather dangerous expression dawned in Ella's eyes. It was always a little unsafe to attack her without sufficient cause. She gave way to the following speech:

"I know nothing about Mack. He is Roudy's friend, so he must be worth while, and he sent us Bogey, for which I love him. It doesn't particularly interest me to talk of people I have never seen, but I certainly see no harm in it. In fact I don't quite know what you mean."

Then she put her chin in the air and went away. Millicent sometimes contrived to do a good deal of harm with the best intentions. But she felt it to

be her duty, under which circumstances she would not have desisted even had it been pointed out to her that she had magnified a forgotten joke into a position of significant unpleasantness in Ella's mind. To be sure she spoke of her brother's friend no more, but she thought over the incident, and began to hate life a little for its dangers and restrictions. Furthermore, it struck her as inconsistent that Milliecent should censure her for joking, however broadly, about a man she had never seen and was never likely to see for all she knew, while only yesterday—Ella pulled up sharp in her thoughts with youthful contempt and some distaste. She had not looked—she did not want to spy—nor did she care in the least what went on—but she must have been blind and wanting half her senses if she did not know that Duke Cotterell had clasped his hand over Millie's instep when he was lying at her feet after tea. And later, coming home in the dusk, he had passed his arm behind her in taking the steering lines, and had kept it there. There was no engagement or even an understanding talked of, and yet Millie allowed Duke to sit with his arm round her—and then assumed superior elder-sister airs of shocked delicacy because Roudy talked nonsense about Ella and his friend. Ella looked for the moral and found it not. It all disgusted her a little; she decided that ordinary men and women sickened her, and returned with greater zest to her stage friends.

Madame Le Marchant arrived at tea-time. She was an elderly woman with a clever face and beautiful dark eyes. She dressed in a manner which filled her sister-in-law with mild surprise, and though her pronunciation of her native tongue was refreshingly perfect, a foreign flavour lingered about

it from her choice of words. Occasionally her English was a literal translation of French, which produced a remarkable effect. She was very fond of her nieces and nephews, in whom she took an active interest. She admired Gay and Wilfred, and cultivated a rather reluctant affection for Millicent, whose good qualities she thoroughly respected; but her secret attraction was for Ella.

"The girl is like I was at her age," she said. "She has fire and spirit in her. The others are more level in temperament, like their mother."

On the whole Mrs. Lipscombe got on with her excellently, in spite of her clothes. On this occasion she wore a large black hat with nodding plumes, a gauze veil tied over it, and a black satin coat of a peculiar cut, which having been born in Paris had not yet reached London, and would not be recognised in its suburbs for a year or so. This alone made her remarkable, but taken in conjunction with some large frills round her neck—"It is so unbecoming not to frame the face," she said—and a brilliant coloured parasol, she was an object for dogs to follow and boys in the street to describe to each other in raised tones.

"It is very hot!" was the first thing she said, sinking into an easy chair, and unfurling a large fan which hung from her waist.

"My dear Feodore, I hope you have not walked!" observed Mrs. Lipscombe solicitously.

"Only from the station—I came by train."

"I wish you lived nearer to us. It is such a journey to Battersea from here," Mrs. Lipscombe said rather plaintively, recalling the effort it always cost her to convey her own stout person to Madame's flat when it became imperative to return her visits.

"I can't think why you chose to live at Battersea, Aunt Fee," said Ella in her fresh young voice. "Don't you hate it after Paris?"

"One hates most places after Paris," said Madame tersely. "London is abominable compared to it."

"But still you might have lived *in* London—not in a suburb," Ella persisted with fine disdain. "Why didn't you take a flat in town?"

"I went to see them, my dear, and everything at my price consisted of two rooms and a coal cellar. I should have had to sell all my furniture, and the old associations were too strong. Flats in London are all very well for young married people who only possess what they stand up in and something in a box, but for an old woman who owns household belongings there is no accommodation—unless I had been better off, and then I should have stopped in Paris."

Wilfred came in before his father, after all, for Mr. Lipscombe was detained in town. By the time the Solicitor arrived his youngest son had nearly coaxed Madame into promising to let him take her up river; he was sitting on the music-stool, nursing his knee, and smiling at his aunt irresistibly. Madame brought out all the best points in Wilfred; he turned all the sunny side of his nature towards her, and forgot to be either patronising or youthfully arrogant. Ella was sitting on the rug aiding and abetting Wilfred, and Millicent and Mrs. Lipscombe were looking on after their manner. It was a very pretty domestic scene in the sunny flower-scented drawing-room, and Gabriel Lipscombe greeted his sister with evident pleasure.

"I meant to have been down before," he said, "but I had to see Lord Roudenham on business."

"I suppose he is in town for the season," said Madame. "Heavens! what years it is since I saw him! The dullest, most difficult young man I ever encountered—proper, discreet, and British to the backbone. Has he altered?"

"Not materially. He has grown older."

"He is in Parliament, of course. Does he ever speak?"

"No, he is one of the silent members," said the Solicitor, laughing. "The story goes that he once wrote a speech—it took him two years, and was adaptable to any measure, but it has never come off, because he cannot decide to what object to dedicate it. He is never likely to compose another, and he is loath to waste it. Each session he fills in the details afresh, and devotes it to some new Bill, but his heart always fails him at the last."

"Ah, bah! So I should think! He is impossible. How well I remember him coming to see you when we lived in Cavendish Street. You were out on several occasions, but he insisted on waiting and talking to me. 'You—er—play, I observe, Miss Lipscombe. That is very nice—music is so delightful, is it not?' All his conversation had an equally intelligent flavour! And he was a young man then."

"He admired you immensely all the same," said the Solicitor, with irrepressible enjoyment of his sister's vivid mimicry. "Did you know that he is married?"

"I only heard it the other day. He has been married for the last two years, has he not? What a fool she must have been to have him!"

"She is not a fool, either," said Mr. Lipscombe. "She is a very handsome woman in a shy, repellent

style. Not much to say for herself. She's a good many years younger than he."

"Married him for the title," commented Madame. "He is well off, too. But if she does not talk, and he cannot, what a house to visit! Who was she?"

"Lena Carisbrooke, daughter of a Lieutenant-Colonel. I think you met her years ago, but she was a child—she is only eight-and-twenty now."

"And he must be over fifty! Yes, I think I remember her. I have a great mind to call and satisfy my curiosity. Where are they living?"

"In Piccadilly—you know the town house."

"There is something rather piquant in Battersea calling on Piccadilly. I shall certainly go."

"Don't destroy the peace of a happy home—and remember Roudenham's old *penchant*," Mr. Lipscombe said, laughing. "By the way, Mary, where is Roudy? He came in with me."

"I will go and find him," Ella said at once, springing up.

"Don't disturb him for my benefit," said his aunt, drily. "He is probably pulling out the insides of engines or soaking himself in petrol, and it would be a pity to interfere with his contentment."

Roudenham was the only one of the family whom she could not like. She respected Gay much as she did Millicent, but Roudenham had horrified her since his childhood, not only by his infirmity, but by what she termed his uncanny ways. He was like an elfish dwarf, she thought, and she had a great repulsion for anything that was diseased or deformed in any way. It made her shudder to look at maimed things, and though her natural kindness prevented her from expressing it, and hurting people's susceptibilities, she secretly thought that it would really be more merciful to destroy imperfect

children as one would the lower animals. She always fancied also that a crooked body made a crooked mind, a theory enforced in Roudy's case by his queer proclivities for strange pets, and an independence of speech which was always most rampant when she was present. Roudy was perfectly aware that his aunt disliked him, and his demon of mischief prompted him to startle and terrify her.

He did not join in the family circle until she was leaving, and then he appeared suddenly on the doorstep, it must be admitted in a rather noiseless and unexpected fashion, leaning on his crutches and regarding his aunt with a silent smile which was decidedly disconcerting. He was wearing a loose jacket in which he had been at work, and from the bulging breast pocket appeared a sharp, restless nose and two little paws with long black claws at the ends. Roudy had slipped his Mere-Kat in and sat him up as if it were a pulpit; at first sight Bogey was hardly distinguishable against the grey tweed, which was somewhat the colour of his own fur, but as he moved his restless head he caught Madame's attention. She had shaken hands with her nephew before she perceived his pet, and drew back with a start and an exclamation.

"There! There's that horrible beast too! It might be his familiar!"

There was a grain of truth in the suggestion, for the Mere-Kat was as lame as his master, and his broad hindquarters and tapering head gave him a deformed appearance also as he limped about. Madame had once seen him running, and the memory haunted her.

Roudenham's bent shoulders shook in silent laughter, and Ella, with an indignant flash at her aunt, went up to him and began to caress Bogey.

Madame regretted her unguarded speech the more in that Ella resented it; she would fain have softened it to Roudy for the sake of appeasing Ella, and the hunchback seemed to know this, for he put his hand on the girl's shoulder and kept her by him as though enjoying the triumph of his possession in something which Madame coveted. She glanced at them for a moment and then turned away.

"I don't know how it is," she said in troubled confidence to Millicent, pausing at the gate, "but Roudenham seems to me to grow more terribly out of proportion every time I see him. Look at his hands, for instance, they are so unusually large and powerful."

"I don't think they are larger than most men's," said Millie in her matter-of-fact tones. "Only you do not realise that if Roudy were straight he would be just like other people. They are very kind hands, too—I would rather let Roudy touch me if I were ill than anyone I know. He is a splendid sick nurse, and somehow his touch is so soothing."

Madame shuddered. "That does not seem to me quite natural either," she said. "It sounds like magnetism, or mesmerism, or something. Good-bye, my dear, come and see me soon. And bring Ella," she added wistfully.

Millicent promised, without realising that Madame's invitation might be the outcome of a feeling of isolation. In truth she was somewhat solitary, in spite of the acquaintances she had already made in the neighbourhood of her flat. But the old friends for whom she cared were all in Paris, and she lived practically alone, save for her maid and her grey parrot. She did not quite know, she said, why she kept the parrot; it was not companionable, as a cat or a dog would have

been, and though it was clever in learning and a splendid talker she did not particularly want to be greeted with a hoarse whisper of "Who are you?" when she came into her own domain.

"And you are an indiscriminating bird, Poll," she remarked, walking up to the cage on her return from The Acacias. "As mechanical in your greeting as all the rest of the world, who approach each other with the inevitable question, 'How do you do?' and would not be particularly sorry if the answer were 'Dying before your eyes!' It is infinitely more sensible to wish one another a good day—not that one gets many in this sunless land."

She stood at the darkening window, looking out over the Park in the dun evening light which steals the colour from the trees, and thinking of her nieces and nephews.

"I wonder why they call that eldest boy Gay? So infinitely and Britishly inappropriate, with his solemn grey eyes staring at a world which holds no humour for him. I suppose he is a good man—as men go—but a trifle ponderous. The father deserves the name far more than the son—the devil will never be entirely exorcised out of Gabriel. I wonder who inherits his nature? Not Millicent, she is placid like her mother, nor Wilfred, who is more like me than Gabriel. I am impulsive and quick-natured, but I have not the demon of slumbering passion which makes him a dangerous man. But how little his family know that! There is his wife who has lived with him for thirty-five years, and has never got below the outer crust of easy-going selfishness which armours all men. And she's a nice woman, too. There is one thing which amazes me in the Lipscombes, and that is their power of attracting the best women to them whatever they

themselves may be. Look at Gay's wife! Look at Gabriel's! I don't say that Gabriel didn't deserve her——"

"Who kissed the cook?" asked the parrot suddenly, closing one infinitely evil eye in a most suggestive wink.

Madame laughed. "Possibly Gabriel did," she said as if in answer. "He is capable of much that goes unsuspected. How pretty Ella is! Something like him, too, with that rough dark hair and the liquid sea-blue eyes. There is no beauty like that of the '*Brune aux yeux bleus*' to my mind. And the family do not see it—think Millicent's plump comeliness more admirable! Or if they acknowledge Ella's looks it is with an eye to the future. 'She is a child at present,' they say, as if that could blind men to her face! Fools! They will find out some day. Poor little Ella! Is she the one to inherit her father's traits, I wonder? I wish she were my daughter—I should like to give Ella and Wilfred my nature and save them from their father's. How superstitious I grow about Gabriel! But I know him so well, and I know that quality that lies at the root of his nature, and which he can never conquer however he holds it in check. And animal passion means animal suffering—poor dumb suffering that nobody pities because it is so terrifying."

She turned her troubled eyes once more on the dusky Park. It was very dark now, a keeper was waiting to close the gates, and the last pedestrians were hurrying out of the walks. Two young girls passed under Madame's balcony; the window stood open, and their chattering voices floated up to her, indistinguishable as to absolute words, a suggestion of careless high spirits. One of them laughed.

"I hope it will not be Ella," Madame said. "If anyone must take that hereditary failing, I hope it will not be Ella!"

"Let us pray!" said the parrot solemnly.

CHAPTER V

"Few in joy's sweet riot
 Able are to listen;
 Thou, to make me quiet,
 Quenchest the sweet riot,
 Tak'st away my diet,
 Puttest me in prison—
 Quenchest joy's sweet riot
 That the heart may listen."

—GEORGE MACDONALD

ELLA'S return from school had been accompanied by a supposition that she would be "finished" at home. It was a comfortably vague supposition, which evaporated gradually, and left Ella with an inevitable facility in French and German, rather less than an average knowledge of the usual curriculum taught in high schools, and a certain mastery of arithmetic—principally because she liked it. She did for a time attend drawing classes in the neighbourhood, where she wore her soul out with the tedium of copying casts in chalk and washing in water-colour drawings from inferior studies. She drew, however, spirited sketches of the frowsy old gentleman who professed to teach the class, and took off the other girls—all more or less neighbours—until brought to task by Millicent for her sense of humour. When Millicent delivered a snub she always did it on moral grounds,

with the same veiled grief in her tones which upbraided her mother for not going to church. She felt it her duty to suggest to Ella, in a superior tone, that the other girls were probably far more natural and simple-minded and generally desirable than her foreign education could have made her, and contrived to leave the impression that suburban young ladies, if brought up in a middle-class fashion, must be superior to anyone who had the misfortune to speak French with the fluency of a native, and who had seen the Alps which they reproduced with such peculiar effect in pencil and paint. Ella had not found the other girls either simple or natural; they had a tendency to speak at the tops of twangish voices, and to pass spicy bits of local gossip even more briskly than their india-rubbers—and the latter were greatly in request. But she accepted Millicent's rebuff with a small grimace, and kept the imitations for Roudy, who relished them.

It was another sore point with Millicent that Roudenham should be such close friends with Ella, and "encourage her to be precocious" according to her own suspicions of what went on in that upper room whither she was never invited. Ella was free to come and go in Roudy's domains as she would, whereas Millicent had known in an occult fashion that she dared not meddle there. Wilfred was Millicent's favourite brother—after Wilfred, Gay. But when Roudenham and Ella adopted each other as friends and allies on Ella's return from Vevey, Millicent began to regard herself as usurped of a place she had never held. Besides, she neither knew nor understood Roudenham, and on several occasions had found herself worsted on some point by him, without his having appeared to be in

opposition to her, and who could tell what heretical doctrine he might not instil into Ella's mind? Millicent almost thought of consulting the Vicar, and getting him to lure Ella into the Bible Class with a view towards conversion.

Roudy's room was, as a fact, Ella's refuge. She liked the atmosphere of the place and the society of Bogey, even if the owner were not there. There was such a glorious view from the west window, and if the sun were to be found anywhere it was here, and there lingered a vague smell of smoke about everything that suggested masculine personality and appealed to her unconsciously feminine mind. Also she liked the litter of Roudy's tools—his experiments and inventions—and above all she liked his books. The bookcase was piled with volumes large and small, duplicates of which were certainly not to be found elsewhere in the house, and which included poetry, fiction, science, theology, and mechanics in bewildering prodigality. The bookcase attracted Ella from the first time she entered the room, and when she knew her brother better she asked a favour of him.

“Roudy, may I read your books?”

“Certainly,” said Roudenham, with refreshing cordiality after the restrictions which Ella had found downstairs.

“What, all of them?” she asked, with a hungry glance at the shelves.

“Any one you like—so long as you read it in this room and don't take it outside.”

“I shouldn't do that,” said Ella, with a glance of comprehension. “What is this about?” taking down a fat volume with a fascinatingly incomprehensible title.

Roudy looked over her shoulder, and a smile lifted

the corners of his mouth. He regarded Ella curiously, as if she were as interesting an experiment as his engines.

"That is a medical book," he said. "There are a good many there. Help yourself."

Ella retired into the armchair with a sigh of pleasure, and took the first of many excursions into a dangerous and attractive land. She never asked questions or desired Roudy to explain, but sometimes she knitted her fine dark brows over a page or so, and more than once he saw her quietly get down a dictionary and look out a word. Then he smiled; and when he came home sometimes and found Ella curled up in the armchair with a book he would go and look over her shoulder to see what it was, and then he smiled still more.

Bogey usually sat in the armchair also; he could scramble into Ella's lap by sticking his soft claws into her frock, if it were a rough material, and then he would dive round behind her and go to sleep in the hollow of her back, when he had burrowed far enough to be comfortable. Ella forgot he was there after a time, and used to be horribly startled to feel him stretch himself suddenly.

The "foreign-educated" schoolgirl never took to her contemporaries of the neighbourhood, despite Millicent's efforts to encourage a flaccid friendship between her and the younger sisters of her own friends. Ella beat them at tennis, and endured their giggling overtures with hidden impatience; but the souls of even the most possible among them were bound up in the youth of the opposite sex whom they happened to know, and to whom they referred with pretended indifference as "mere boys, you know." Ella preferred Gerald Du Maurier's photograph. She did, however, make a friend in the neighbour-

hood in a most unexpected quarter, and the acquaintance was looked upon by her family with deprecating tolerance, as slightly undesirable, but in the main harmless.

Out of the wide thoroughfare on which The Acacias looked through its grand green trees there ran many a smaller turning, where semi-detached villas stood modestly behind laburnum trees or hawthorn hedges, and figured under the astounding names of Belle Vue House, Trafalgar Lodge, Newlands, and the like. Half-way up one of these roads stood Mon Désir, a villa whose other half was called Waterloo. It was a meek, depressed-looking house, with nothing either romantic or warlike about it, but a row of polled lime trees in front, and window-boxes wherein plants never flourished. At Mon Désir lived little elderly Miss Vaughan. She had owned the sobriquet ever since she came to the neighbourhood, six years before, with a bed-ridden mother, on whom she waited hand and foot, and who died four years later. Miss Vaughan had been a governess; she had taken her first situation at nineteen, and had patiently worn out her youth in the service until her mother became too much of an invalid to be left, when she used up the remnants as a sick nurse. When her mother died the last object of her existence seemed to be removed, and there really was no apparent reason why she should be at all. She went on living, however, in the little villa with the sentimental name, where she had unconsciously acted out a beautiful duty, with a silent heroism and self-sacrifice that went unrecorded, and was never for an instant regarded as such by herself. She was not now more than eight-and-thirty; but the grinding years had pressed out all impulse or adventure in her, and she never thought of going

into service again to improve her means, narrow though they were. People who chanced to notice the washed-out face and colourless hair under the little black hat, as Miss Vaughan's sparse figure went backwards and forwards down the road to church, set her down as elderly, if they thought of her years at all; but she was generally regarded under the mere outline of a middle-aged lady whose existence was so manifestly drab that she was not interesting even to think about. She was quite harmless, poor soul, and certainly unassuming, even in those charities to accomplish which she had literally to deny herself, but which she did contrive with a simple-mindedness and lack of self-consciousness in keeping with her worn-out life.

Miss Vaughan's income was barely sufficient for her needs, modestly though she lived. It was mainly derived from house property in the neighbourhood of Clapham, which she was as incapable of managing as a child of six. It rested pretty much in the hands of her solicitors whether she had bread and butter to eat, and had not Lipscombe and Verrinder been fortunate in securing tenants, Miss Vaughan might have starved. Gabriel Lipscombe was Miss Vaughan's man of business; he had known her father in the days when he was a captain in the Army, and had managed Mrs. Vaughan's affairs from the time when the said gentleman died of fever in India, leaving his devoted memory—little more—to the widow and orphan. The house property had come to them later from the other side of the family. Poor little Miss Vaughan marked the opposite extreme to Lord Roudenham in the business of Lipscombe and Verrinder. As Lord Roudenham was Mr. Lipscombe's most important client, Miss Vaughan was his most unimportant,

admiration. She grew to associate the sunlight and the laburnum tree with the young man in his strength and beauty, and if she caught sight of it later in the day would unconsciously begin to weave romances about him.

Miss Vaughan's road was also the most direct way from Trinity Lodge to The Acacias, and Beatrice Reeve generally went that way as her acquaintance with the Lipscombes increased. On one occasion when Wilfred walked home with her they chanced to be on that side of the road where *Mon Désir* stood. Miss Vaughan was standing at the window and saw them pass, the girl's bright face turned towards the man's as she chattered animatedly. From that day Miss Vaughan added a heroine to her romance, and learned her name from Ella by careful description.

She was surprised by a most unexpected visitor one evening in early June. The laburnum tree had lost its wealth of "golden rain," and Miss Vaughan was looking across the road in dreamy regret when the door bell rang. She had so few visitors that she immediately concluded it must be Ella, and hurried to the door herself. On the doorstep stood the lame brother whom she had seen with Mr. Lipscombe; he was leaning on his crutches with his face towards the road where some children were playing, but he turned at once when she opened the door, and raised his hat, skilfully keeping the crutch in place with his arm.

"I came round to show you this renewal of lease," he said, smiling. He had a very pleasant voice, Miss Vaughan thought.

"Oh, thank you!" she said, in a somewhat flurried fashion. "I am sure it is most kind of Mr. Lipscombe—he always takes such trouble to explain, and is so patient with me!" She stood on one

side for him to enter. "Won't you come in?" she said hesitatingly.

"Thank you," he answered quietly, and followed her into the sitting-room.

There was really nothing to explain about the lease; it was as comprehensible as such documents would ever be to Miss Vaughan, and she had received them before by post, but in her simplicity she never thought to wonder why Mr. Lipscombe had sent it with a special explanation for once. Besides, Roudy explained nothing; he showed it to Miss Vaughan, after which he put it back in his pocket, and sat and talked. She thought again what a pleasant voice he had, and forgot to be embarrassed or stiff in manner under the ease of his. Poor fellow! she thought, what a misfortune for him! and grew almost self-possessed in her pity, for, like all the rest of the world, she unsexed Roudy on account of his infirmity. He read her feeling in her face, but it did not affect him at all; only by one thing he was puzzled—after a while there dawned something like regret in Miss Vaughan's expression. She looked a little disappointed, he thought—what was it?

"I think it most kind of Mr. Lipscombe to ask you to call," she chanced to say at that moment. "I could not think who it was at first, I see so few visitors. But I know you all quite well by sight."

Then it flashed across Roudy's brain—she wanted Wilfred. As one of Mr. Lipscombe's sons had taken the trouble to come personally she would of course have liked to have the physically beautiful one. "By the law of contradictions," thought Roudy. "The thing we don't possess ourselves always looks so desirable to us. But had she been a young and beautiful woman she would have preferred me by contrast. She would have said I was

more interesting, the real truth being that she would have enjoyed her own generosity in being very charming to me."

He fully appreciated the fact that it would have been an innocent pleasure to Miss Vaughan to see Wilfred's handsome face and figure in her dingy little sitting-room, and the memory would have brightened it for her for ever afterwards.

"What a pity!" he thought impersonally, as he left the little house. "I am afraid I can't manage to send Wilfred round there, but I can Beatrice. She is not quite so interesting, not being a man, but I remember that Miss Vaughan asked Ella who she was, so I suppose she would like to see her nearer."

When he said he could send Beatrice to see little elderly Miss Vaughan, he spoke with inward certainty, and it was no idle boast. The imp of mischief in Roudy had prompted him gradually to strengthen his mastery over Beatrice; he knew that what he wished was more likely to influence her than not, and he had no scruple in using his power, though he was not sufficiently crooked in nature to wish to compass her ultimate unhappiness merely for the sake of doing so. Power is very tempting when it is so easily acquired, and Roudy was not in the habit of resisting any temptation that came in his way.

The next time Beatrice called at The Acacias Roudy quietly displaced Wilfred and walked with her down to the gate himself. This was not so difficult of accomplishment as it would once have been; Wilfred had been out in the cold lately, and was so resentful that he pretended to himself that he was indifferent. It had not yet entirely penetrated his armour of conceit that any girl—particularly one whom he had honoured with his least attention—could prefer to talk to a poor fellow like Roudy,

but he did realise that on several occasions he had been treated cavalierly, and he was sulking in a high and mighty fashion. He turned on his heel in this instance, with a smile of mingled amusement and disdain which was really so well done that it was a pity it entirely missed its mark.

"I want to ask a favour of you," Roudy said, pausing at the gate. Beatrice paused too, and looked back at him with a smile in her eyes. She had a very young face, and a frank, unclouded expression. Some men might have felt remorseful. "I hope you will grant it," Roudy went on, leaning on his crutches, and looking at her in his favourite fashion, "because I dislike asking favours very much, and there are not many people of whom I would ask them. I have screwed up my courage on the present occasion."

His eyes always said such different things to his lips! There was no diffidence in his eyes, only a look that she felt compelled assent, and—the rest she did not analyse.

Over the gate grew a hawthorn tree that had flowered late. The branches were still crusted with white blossoms, and the pungent scent was strong upon the air. Beatrice thought suddenly that it was a very beautiful world, and rather intoxicating merely to live in it. The excitement of existence laid hold upon her; she felt that her youth was a desirable thing—and all because Roudy had asked a favour!

"Do you want me to grant it before I hear what it is?" she said.

"Can't you trust me, Beatrice?"

She did not answer, but the pause was so unbearable that she broke a spray of hawthorn and tucked it into her gown.

"It is only that I want you to go and see a very lonely elderly lady who lives in Ridgemount Road. She has very few friends, but you will find she knows Ella, and young society is very attractive to her. I went in the other night, and she was glad to welcome even me, but it gives her great pleasure to see pretty things."

He was not looking at her now, and she was glad of it, but she betrayed herself by the haste with which she said, "Of course I will go. What is the name of the house?"

"Mon Désir—a most appropriate name just now!"

"Very well; I will go as soon as possible, and I shall say I am a friend of Ella's."

"But you will really be a friend of mine!"

And then they shook hands, and that was absolutely all. Except that Beatrice treasured a little withered piece of white hawthorn, until she found that the flowers fell and left nothing but the thorns.

CHAPTER VI

"Give her time—on sea and sky
Let her gaze if she be fain—
As they looked ere he drew nigh
They will never look again!"

—JEAN INGELOW

MR. LIPSCOMBE preferred living in a suburb for many reasons. He liked the fresher air when he came down from town; he liked a larger house and garden than he could afford in London; and he liked keeping his family at a convenient

distance from his business. The word "business" covered a large area as Mr. Lipscombe used it. He looked upon his family life as something set apart, whither to retire after the cares of the day—being, as Ella said of Roudy, "somewhat Eastern in his views"—but the greater part of his life lay outside the narrow bounds of The Acacias.

The day after Roudy asked his favour of Beatrice under the white hawthorn it chanced that his father had an engagement that kept him in town after business hours. Mr. Lipscombe was rather subject to engagements; they attacked him like a periodical ailment. But a letter arrived by the afternoon post which drove him into the outer office and back again into his own room, with a knit in his brow.

"Roudy," he said, somewhat apologetically, "can you go round by Piccadilly on your way home? Lord Roudenham has written about the Home Farm, and would like the deeds this evening. I spoke to Wilfred about it, but it appears that he is going out to a dance to-night, or some folly of that kind, and wants to get down at the usual time. I can't go myself, and he doesn't like seeing Verrinder. Do you think you can manage it?"

"Certainly," said Roudy quietly. He rarely went about alone, owing to his difficulty in getting in and out of vehicles, but he was capable of doing so upon occasion.

"You had better drive down, and keep the cab waiting—the business won't take more than ten minutes, and then you can go on to the station," Gabriel Lipscombe said. He spoke somewhat uneasily still, and the knit was not entirely smoothed from his forehead when he went out to help Roudy into the taxi himself.

"I shall not be ended up this journey!" re-

marked the hunchback reassuringly. "Policemen and loafers are my brothers by affinity, and my instinctive friends—they always come to the rescue. So long, father."

Lord Roudenham's house faced the Green Park; it had a wider frontage than most of its neighbours, and did not give the impression of barely having breathing space peculiar to so many of the private houses in Piccadilly. There were flowers on the balcony, and an air of sober hilarity about it, for it was the middle of the season, and though the Roudenhams were neither smart nor very gay they entertained to a certain extent, rather as a solemn duty than for their own pleasure.

Roudy did not keep the taxi waiting. His assertion about the policemen verified itself by a portly constable coming to his assistance, and holding his crutches for him while he half lifted him out with solicitous care.

"Lean on me, sir! There—we managed that first-rate!" he said sympathetically. "Shall I pay the cab for you, sir?"

"Thank you!" Roudy answered, smiling rather whimsically as he remembered what he had told his father, and he went slowly up the steps to the hall door.

Yes, Lord Roudenham was in, the butler said; would Mr. Lipscombe come straight to the library? For he was an old servant, and knew Roudy by sight.

Twenty minutes later Lord Roudenham ran upstairs—two steps at a time, for he was in a hurry—and tapped at his wife's door. He was answered by the apparition of Lady Roudenham herself in a white *négligé*, and with a thick rope of her dark hair fallen across her shoulders. She was dressing

for dinner, and looked somewhat astonished at the unexpected interruption.

"Oh, Lena," Lord Roudenham said, "one of the Lipscombes is here—came down with those deeds—and I have asked him to stop to dinner. Can you come down and look after him while I dress? We have no one coming to-night, have we?"

"No, fortunately not. I am going to the Foreign Office later—at least I have a card."

"Oh, yes, and I can join you there and bring you home. That will not interfere—he will leave after dinner. Can you look after him?"

"Of course I will. They are nice boys—is it Wilfred or Gay?"

"Neither. It is Roudenham, my godson—poor fellow!" The inevitable shadow which followed a mention of Roudy from casual acquaintances was on Lord Roudenham's face as he spoke. He was in his fiftieth year, a tall spare man with a face which was plain rather through lack of expression than irregularity of feature. His hair and beard were very straight and brown, and his eyes were a nondescript shade of greyish-blue. His forehead was high and narrow, and he looked as though he would be obstinate rather than firm. No one would ever dream that Lord Roudenham was anything but a gentleman from the most casual glance at him, and hardly anyone would have glanced at him a second time. Years ago Madame Le Marchant—then Miss Lipscombe—had said that he was irritatingly immaculate; one could no more quarrel with his principles than with his cuffs and collars.

His wife was more than twenty years younger than himself, but such a wide difference was not apparent as they stood facing each other, for Lord

Roudenham's level life had left few lines on his face, and Lena, Lady Roudenham, had at all times a thoughtful expression that stole from her youth. She went back to her dressing, and glanced at her reflection in the glass with grave criticism rather than personal vanity before she left the room. She looked, from habit, to see that her dark wavy hair was swept back as softly and clearly as usual from her white forehead and small flat ears. It was a very candid lovable face, with kind dark eyes that looked at the world in a straightforward fashion, and a mouth that could mean many things, but all of them would be beautiful.

Lena turned from the glass without satisfaction or disappointment, and lifting her gown ran downstairs with a soft, light step characteristic of her. She did not see anyone as she crossed the drawing-room, and concluded that Lord Roudenham's guest was still downstairs. The servants had not yet lighted the lamps, knowing her ladyship's prejudice in favour of twilight, and the June evening was growing dusky in the room. Lena sat down at the piano and began to play to herself while waiting. She played Chopin's Scherzo, and improvised a little on the *motif* of the "King of Thule" in Berlioz's "Faust." Still she was uninterrupted, and though rather surprised she hesitated to send a message to Lord Roudenham to the effect that she was in the drawing-room. They would come up presently, she supposed, and began to sing a little song which she had heard an old Italian peasant woman sing, and which she had rescued from the *patois* into comprehensible English. The accompaniment was her own, but the music came with the words:

- "The end of much is love—
Be slow in clasping hands,
Be slower still to kiss,
For pain lies deep in this,
With Heaven still blue above—
The end of much is love.
Who is it understands?
We know no more than this,
A dream that we call bliss—
The rapture of the night!
- "The end of more is pain—
He who says 'I am glad'
Draws breath a minute's space
And smoothes a grieving face
To find that he is sad.
The end of more is pain,
For all sweet things are vain,
And vain is our delight.
Sad is the face of day—
For rest and night we pray—
The rapture of the night!
- "The end of all is death.
Love dies of our despair,
And dying, turns and flings
A memory that stings—
A curse with his last breath.
The end of all is death.
Pain has no further might,
And leaves but fear and doubt,
Till death has blotted out
The rapture of the night."

"Thank you," said someone quietly as she finished.

Lena did not absolutely start, but she left the piano rather quickly, and came across the room to the voice. Then she saw that the hunchback had been sitting in the shadow of the window curtains, and she had missed him when she entered.

"How do you do?" she said simply, holding out her hand. "I am so sorry I did not see you before. Why did you not speak to me?"

"I ought to have got up, I suppose," Roudy said with a slightly apologetic smile. "Only you went straight towards the piano and I hoped that you would play. It was a temptation not to be resisted. Do you mind very much?"

"Not at all," said Lena frankly. She regarded him more closely with the meditative air she always had when studying something that interested her. "Are you fond of music?"

"Intensely. I think you musicians hardly realise what great pleasure you have it in your power to give to those who are not gifted like you, but who love it all the same."

She had sat down beside him with her hands folded loosely in her lap. Lena Roudenham possessed the unusual quality of being able to sit absolutely still while she talked, without fidgeting with anything. Her broad gaze was fixed full upon Roudy with honest interest and sympathy.

"I do not profess to play or sing much," she remarked. "Lord Roudenham does not care for it."

"So you keep it for yourself—an indulgence only obtainable sometimes?"

"You were very quick to guess that," she said smiling. "Yes, I do not very often get time to sing or play. And I prefer doing it in the twilight—but that," she added, "is no reason to doom you also to a dim religious light. I will ring for the lamps."

"Unless you will go back to the piano?" said Roudy serenely. "I am sorry now I spoke when I did. I am sure you would have gone on otherwise."

"I daresay I should. But I am expecting dinner to be ready every minute and Lord Roudenham to

come down. I will play to you another time, and sing too, if you like."

"Thank you," he assented quietly. "What was the name of the song you sang?"

"It really has no name. It is a queer little Tuscan song, which I have somewhat mitigated and sing to an accompaniment of my own. Do you go to any of the London concerts?"

"Very seldom," he said. "Neither my sisters nor my brother care for concerts much, and I have dropped out of the way of going about alone."

She was quick to comprehend why, and liked him the better for speaking so naturally of his infirmity. Also, of course, she put it down to inherent bravery, and did not reason that use might have made him less sensitive in mentioning it—after the manner of generous women who are apt to see their own virtues reflected in other people, and do not realise that the conclusion is their own. The old cynical amusement flitted over Roudy's face as he met Lena's quick glance and recognised the appreciative pity which women had hardly ever failed to give him. A wider experience than he was credited with told him that in this instance utter simplicity would be his greatest attraction, coupled with a certain sympathy of ideas. In the case of Beatrice Reeve he had known, quite as certainly, that she must be piqued and contradicted into interest, her pretty youth being somewhat spoiled and surfeited by things running too smoothly. Beatrice never knew what Roudy would ask of her, or how disposed she would find him. She attributed his capriciousness to ill-health, but if Wilfred could have followed the same course with any appearance of reason the uncertainty would have been just as attractive.

When Lord Roudenham came into the drawing-room Lena was still sitting by Roudy's side exerting herself on his behalf with more willingness than she often had for her husband's most important guests. Lord Roudenham looked pleased; he was as charitable in his way as Lena was in hers, and he always had an uneasy feeling that he could not do as much for his godson as he would have liked in satisfaction to his gentlemanly conscience. The butler announced dinner a few minutes later, and both Lord and Lady Roudenham rose. Then they paused, each in their different manner, and looked at Roudy. Lord Roudenham would have liked to have offered to help him, but even to his somewhat slow comprehension it seemed kinder to treat him like an ordinary being. Lena would have liked to offer a thousand times more, but Roudy knew that she would never dream of absolutely doing so for an instant. With the instinct of the artist he stretched out his hand for his crutches, and missed them by an inch. He knew exactly where he had placed them without looking, but this time he did not appear to be able to find them. Then Lena came to the rescue with unconscious eagerness and put them into his hand.

"Ah, thank you!" he said. Nothing could have been more perfect than the slight note of gratitude in his voice. Lady Roudenham's smile was as friendly as he knew it would be.

It was rather a pleasant dinner party. Lord Roudenham was agreeably surprised to find that his godson could at least talk well, and knew the subjects of which he spoke. He did not say flashily clever things, which his host would certainly not have understood, and would have taken as grave assertions, but his view of politics was

broad and comprehensive, and he could give a reason for his opinion. It was the same with any subject started. "The boy has improved. He has brains, and some of his father's brilliance," Lord Roudenham decided. Vague thoughts of his unpublished speech flitted through his brain; Roudy had certainly given him a phrase, if not an idea that could be worked in. It might not be a bad plan to discuss certain measures with him. So he pondered, while in the interval Roudy talked of a new scientific discovery to Lena. He treated her in an impersonal fashion, as though she were a man rather than a woman, which pleased her, for it gave her a feeling of width and liberty, and she spoke more freely than she usually could. Roudy left a very good impression behind him when he went, and received a most cordial invitation to come again from both host and hostess.

"You must let us see more of you," Lord Roudenham said, with more animation than he usually showed. "You hardly ever come here."

"I hardly ever go anywhere," said Roudy, smiling.

"Can't you stretch a point in our favour?" Lena's softer voice put in. Then she added, "We will have some music if you come," unconscious that she was offering a bribe.

"You seem to think I require to be tempted," Roudy said drily. "If I hesitated it was out of kindness to you. You might have too much of me!"

But neither of his hearers comprehended a warning, and when the door closed behind him Lord Roudenham said, "I hope he will come again—poor fellow!" And Lena answered, "Yes, I

should like to know him better," and meant what she said.

She was a woman who had observed life without experiencing it, but she was not yet dimly aware of such a state of things. Even her marriage had a colourless quality about it that made it a little unreal to her. Her calm affection for her husband arose out of a feeling that he was very kind; he had come into her life at a time when she was left practically alone, and had offered her a home and a status in life, as well as the protection of his name. Lena accepted the situation thankfully, and glided calmly into married life with all deeper emotions still untried. There was no hint of passion in the whole connection. Lord Roudenham gave her an equal esteem as she gave him, and perhaps a more pronounced affection. But she was not at all unhappy. Sometimes life appeared a little monotonous—an inevitable round of entertaining and visiting, of cultivating some acquaintance who had influence, of patronising some *protégé* who sheltered himself under the importance of Lord Roudenham's name—all this was done with an uninteresting object. It was duty rather than pleasure.

Lena was not a woman who made many friends; her quiet manner did not invite confidences, and those who knew her with any degree of intimacy had done so rather in spite of herself. She had a greater partiality for women's society than for men's, but she was more attractive to the opposite sex than to her own, possibly because she talked little and could listen intelligently. It was, on the whole, rather a disappointment to her that women passed her by. She was inclined to blame herself, and yet did not see where the fault lay, nor in all

probability could she have altered it had she done so, while her nature lay in its comatose state, for she lacked the sympathy of experience. She went through the world looking for a lost quantity—something she had never found—and failed to see that the necessary touchstone was absent in herself.

At the Foreign Office that night she caught herself thinking now and again of the cripple. She wondered in what degree it altered the aspect of life to be so handicapped, and tried to imagine herself in a position which made so many commonplace things impossible. It began to strike her as an increasing marvel that he could at all resemble other people; yet in discussion his standpoint had been that of any other man, if anything more comprehensive and broadminded, she thought. He had made allowances which she would not have expected from one limited as he was, and he had an individuality which impressed her vaguely, and made the people round her for once consciously unreal. But, like most of the world, she fell into the snare of substituting his infirmity for his manhood, and though she was slowly coming to the knowledge of his personality she still denied him the commonest masculine attributes. A little incident of that very evening might have been a revelation to her.

When Roudy left the house in Piccadilly he hailed an open cab and drove away westward. His route took him by the Parks, thick with the June leafage, and studded with twinkling lamps in the distance. It was dark, and the serpent trail of light which stretches along Piccadilly to the corner marked the delicate curve of the highway distinctly. Motors and carriages bowled past swiftly, incessantly—flashing a second's vision of fair women faces and

soft raiment—glow of colour, froth of white billows—suggesting intoxicating beauty to a mind too easily fired. The hunchback leaned back on his padded cushions and followed the stream with his eyes, his thoughts following further still. The essence of the London season was round him—he caught the atmosphere, and his pulses throbbed. Here was the glory of living—the languor of enjoyment, spiced with the flavour of unsatisfied desire.

The rapture of the night!

He thought of it as the taxi turned down south, bowling swiftly over the smooth wide road; he was glad that it was not closed, the rush of the air suited the beating of the blood in his veins.

The excitement was still strong upon him as the cab rolled over the stones outside the terminus and came to a standstill, and he scrambled out on to the kerbstone.

There was a small commotion on the pavement—only a woman, drunken and fierce, being ordered out of the way by the police, and offering a sullen resistance. She was still young, and slight of figure under her slatternly shawl, and the pitiless electric light showed a thin worn face and blue eyes stupid with despairing anger and the horror of life. As Roudy turned from paying the cabman he came face to face with her, and those eyes caught an expression lingering still in his. It was one she understood.

“Ay!” she said loudly, “go on your way! It’s the road to hell anyhow. You, and such as you, bring us to what we are—you brutes—you!”

The police interfered. Roudy looked at her with interest as she was led away. He had never seen

her before, but the revelation of drink had shown her a certain quality in him. She was one of the very few who had recognised his virility.

CHAPTER VII

Rose-white Youth—
 Passionate, pale—
 A singing stream in a flow'ry dale—
 A fairy prince in a prosy tale—
 O, there's nothing half so finely frail
 As rose-white Youth !

—ROBERT HICHENS

THERE came a day in Ella's life when she felt she must take her fate in her own hands, and mould her future as she would. It was a sudden decision born of little things, but she thought she saw that circumstances had been leading up to it for some time, and when the moment came it appeared to have been inevitable, as such things always do. Millicent had been to a ladies' choir meeting that morning—it was one of the many parish organisations to which she belonged—and the immediate effect was that when she came home she reprimanded Ella for neglected duties. Ella had been day-dreaming, and felt herself in the wrong; therefore she retorted that Millie had left her own duties to go to church, and she could not see that the end sanctified the means. Millicent was grieved—a process which involved a certain tone of voice she always used in church and in reading the Bible, and an expression like that of an unrecognised martyr—and Ella departed from the saintly presence in a state of final revolt. Of course, Millicent complained to her mother, for it

was just so long since she had been at school that she had lost the way of its unwritten laws, the first of which is that you shall never refer a difference to grown-up authority, under pain of being called a tale-bearer. Equally of course Ella, fresh from such traditions, resented such a course as unpardonable, and added contempt to her indignation.

"Ella is so silly!" was Millicent's complaint; everything which did not coincide with her mode of thinking was designated by her under that term.

"Millie doesn't play the game—she goes and whines to mother like a baby!" thought Ella scornfully. "I can't live like this any longer. I must go, and the sooner they understand that the better." For to the very young a decision looks like an accomplishment.

Poor Mrs. Lipscombe, leading a placid existence between darned socks and the absorbing interest of her children, was startled one fine morning by Ella's attacking her with a pale face and eyes like a thunderstorm.

"Mother, I want to speak to you about my future!" she said gravely.

"Your future, Ella?" her mother repeated in astonishment. "Surely there is plenty of time to think of that, my dear!"

Millicent had never aspired to a future; she was quite content with her present. But the intense earnestness of Ella's project was obvious.

"Yes," said Ella, gathering breath. It is difficult to lay bare the desire of your soul in broad daylight, and among matter-of-fact surroundings, to a listener who is plainly not sympathetic, and who has the unfair advantage of being very much older and more experienced. Ella was very fond of her mother in an impetuous childish fashion,

chiefly from association; but she had never confided in her, because Mrs. Lipscombe had never realised that there was anything to confide.

"I want to go on the Stage," said Ella in a hard voice. It surprised even herself. She had not meant to speak like that, but under extreme excitement human voices change more than facial expression.

Mrs. Lipscombe stared at her in surprise.

"The Stage!" she said, with an accent of faint distaste. It was not that she really meant to repulse the girl, or to depreciate the profession, but the thought was vaguely disagreeable to her, which showed itself in her tone. It strung Ella up to fighting pitch; she steadied her voice and braced her nerves for the contest, and spoke impetuously. Mrs. Lipscombe found herself drowned in a torrent of explanation and argument, with facts and plans hurled at her defenceless head. It was a revelation to her in many ways, and a far from reassuring experience. When she could get a chance to speak she entrenched herself behind parental authority.

"Well, Ella, this is a great surprise to me. Neither your father nor myself had the least idea of it. I will speak to him and see what he says. But personally I am entirely against it. I think you too young, and most unfitted for the life, nor do I desire to see any daughter of mine on the Stage."

It was exactly what any mother might have said in like circumstances, but to Ella it was the embodiment of prejudice, bigotry, and utter indifference to her own inclinations. She did not plead or cry, because it was not in her nature to use such weapons, but she rose without another word and walked away, her heart sore within her, and feeling

herself a female Ishmael. She ran up to Roudy's room and threw herself down in the armchair, exhausted with her own excitement and the strain of the past scene.

"It is going to be war now!" she thought. "War to the knife. But I shall hold out—it is my will against all theirs; but I shall certainly go."

She fancied the whole household regarding her with cold disapproval, and steeled herself to indifference. She was a little surprised to find that her mother treated her as usual at luncheon, and that Millicent proposed going to Trinity Lodge to play tennis as though nothing had happened. Had not Mrs. Lipscombe told her anything? She had fancied them discussing it as soon as she was out of the way, and engrossed with the subject all the morning. Ella had not realised that the whole household was not to be upset by her announcement, or that her little world did not hinge upon her personal determination. We are so important to ourselves—at sixteen—that we do not realise our lack of importance to anyone else.

As a matter of fact Mrs. Lipscombe had nearly forgotten the subject. It did once or twice recur to her mind during the day, and she thought of it as a most unfortunate craze that Ella had taken. She could not think how the child had picked up so much knowledge of the subject—she seemed to have all the technicalities at her fingers' ends—and on the whole it was an unpleasant incident which she hoped would soon be forgotten. In the course of conversation with her husband a passing reference to a case in the paper about an actress brought it again to her memory, otherwise she would probably not have said anything about it at all.

"Oh, Gabriel, that reminds me," she said, with a wrinkle in her fat forehead, "Ella has taken a most violent fancy that she wants to go on the Stage. She came to me this morning with a whole plan cut and dried, and was quite tragic over it."

"Did she?" said her father carelessly. "Stage mania seems to be as catching as measles. All schoolgirls get it."

"Of course you would not wish her to adopt such a profession?"

"Good Heavens, no! Perfectly impossible in my position, apart from other reasons. And to anyone with any knowledge of the Stage——"

He broke off abruptly, but he need not have feared for himself. His wife would have accepted all such knowledge as a new instance of his wide experience and good judgment.

"I will tell Ella," she remarked.

She softened it to the girl, however, by a pretence of having seriously considered the proposal, and finding innumerable difficulties in the way.

"For instance, you have no training or knowledge of the art," she said.

"I must begin to train at once, of course," was the surprising answer.

"And how do you propose to train, my dear?"

"There are classes, or private tutors," said Ella. "I think, myself, I should prefer being in a studio with other students. There are plenty in London. Of course I knew I must have lessons."

"And how are you going to pay for them?"

"If my father will lend me the money I will repay him," Ella answered, after a second's hesitation.

"I know he will not do that, Ella. He is entirely opposed to your going on the Stage."

There came a pause. Then the girl spoke slowly.

"You mean to say you will not help me?"

"We do not wish you to adopt such a profession."

"Very well—then I must think what I can do," Ella said quietly.

Mrs. Lipscombe shrugged her shoulders rather impatiently as her daughter left the room. Really, Ella was very tiresome to be so persistent! She hoped Roudy was not egging her on. Millicent had hinted that the intimacy between them was doing her no good. It rather distressed her that Ella should retire to Roudy's room as a refuge—it seemed like an affirmation; but she was relieved to meet her coming downstairs with her hat on in the later afternoon, and to learn that she was going to see little elderly Miss Vaughan. Ella was rather white and quiet, but she spoke in her usual tone.

Under that calm exterior the volcano was bubbling, if Mrs. Lipscombe could have known it. Ella was going out, because to stay in the house was intolerable to her restlessness and excitement. She meant to take Roudy into her confidence when he came home, but she would rather do something in the meanwhile, so she went to *Mon Désir*.

Miss Vaughan had another visitor, somewhat to Ella's discontent. She heard a bright laugh as the little maid-of-all-work announced her, and the first thing her eyes lit on was Beatrice Reeve, sitting on the low, hard couch at the window, and seeming to absorb all the light in the room in her gay young figure. Ella stopped short involuntarily; the fates were not kind to-day, she wanted Miss Vaughan to herself, and resented Beatrice's intrusion into a sanctum which she felt she had originally dis-

covered, and to which she had the first right. Miss Vaughan was hers—her own by right of trove—what did Beatrice want there instead of in the drawing-rooms of her own suburban friends? The contrast of Miss Reeve's dainty muslin and ribbons with the poor, shabby furniture, jarred on her; she felt that the pretty animated face ought to be a reproach to Providence in comparison with Miss Vaughan's faded appearance. Then her heart smote her—Miss Vaughan was so evidently in the seventh heaven of delight at having visitors! She was so lonely and so dull, poor little woman, that even Ella's visits had been a boon. No wonder she looked in a flutter of excitement and delight over Beatrice in her laces and furbelows—no wonder that there was a little pleased flush in her cheeks and a delighted eagerness in her manner as she put forward a stiff-backed chair for Ella!

"Why, I am quite rich in visitors to-day!" she said in her plaintive tones; Miss Vaughan had never lost a scared way of speaking, acquired at the rigid institution where she had been charitably educated. "Pray sit down, Miss Ella! You know this is quite an event for me, Miss Reeve! I sometimes pass weeks without seeing anyone but the tradesmen and my little maid."

Ella was wondering, while she spoke, why Beatrice had coloured at the first sight of her, as if she had been caught out in something. She had not the least notion how she had come to know of Miss Vaughan, but there was nothing to look guilty over in such an act of kindness as calling upon her.

"Yes, if you are not one of a large family, visitors are doubly welcome," Beatrice said easily, in spite of her momentary discomfort. "When

we first came to the neighbourhood I felt dreadfully lost. I often tell Ella, Miss Vaughan, that she doesn't realise the blessing of having brothers and sisters."

"I don't—always," said Ella drily. "But I daresay I should be sorry to part with them."

"Ah, you have several brothers, have you not?" said Miss Vaughan, pouring out some particularly weak tea for her last visitor into a small, thin cup which had a quaint resemblance to herself, for its coloured pattern was nearly washed out, and its shape was old-fashioned and quite out of date.

"Which is your favourite?" asked Beatrice with a smile which Ella described to herself as ingratiating.

"Roudy," she replied emphatically, sure in her own mind that Beatrice expected her to say Wilfred. She was rather disappointed not to see any surprise on Miss Reeve's face.

"All the members of a large family go in pairs," she merely remarked. "At least I have always heard so. I think it must be rather nice to have someone to confide in always at hand. Do you tell your brother—everything?"

"Yes, pretty much," Ella answered, unconscious that this afternoon's encounter represented the "everything" just now in Beatrice's mind. "Roudy took a good deal of trouble to make me like him in the first instance. He was the only person who treated me like a rational being for one thing—everyone else seemed to regard me as a foreign product, and they still think of me in swaddling bands. Roudy didn't—he even confided in me a little, to make me confide in him, I think." "If Roudenham could have heard her he would have laughingly acknowledged it, for Ella's quick-

ness and intuition delighted him. She left Miss Vaughan's impromptu tea-party when Beatrice did in order to be at home when he got in from town, and to claim his attention at once. "I want to get home to speak to Roudy," was the last thing she said to Beatrice as they shook hands at the gate. The name rang in Miss Reeve's ears as she walked home, and brought his personality again before her mental vision. Ella's avowed preference seemed like an excuse for her own—her own—what? She left the unfinished sentence in the tangle of her thoughts, and went on to acknowledge hesitatingly to herself that she had certainly gone to see Miss Vaughan because he had asked her, and now he was sure to hear of it, and what would he think? What did it matter what he thought, she added in the same second—he could not know that the smell of white May made her thrill with an unavowed memory, and that she had kept a little withered spray.

As Ella turned in the opposite direction she saw a young man walking up the road towards her whom she slowly recognised as Mr. Marmaduke Cotterell. He must have been to tea at The Acacias, she thought, and wondered for a second, because he usually reserved his visits for Sunday. However, it did not interest her beyond the moment, and she dismissed the subject with an inward hope that he had put Millie in a better temper! She did not care in the least about Duke himself, and meant to bow and pass on, but he stopped and held out his hand.

"I have been to tea at The Acacias," he said, a little obviously.

"Yes," said Ella carelessly, looking up under the shadow of her wide straw hat with the frank

indifference of a child. "Has Wilfred come in yet?"

She did not mean Wilfred—she meant Roudy. But they got down from town about the same time, and this stupid young man had preferred Wilfred as a friend and would be more likely to know of his return than his brother's.

"No, not yet—I mean yes," said Duke, absently. He was thinking what very blue eyes Ella had, and watching a little dark lock that waved to and fro across her forehead with every breath of air. He had never happened to see her out of the family circle before, and therein his attention was absorbed by Millicent. He wished he could turn round and walk back with Ella, or that she would walk on with him—but for neither course was there much excuse.

"Your father isn't down yet," he said. "Were you going to the station to meet him?"

Ella looked a little surprised, the station being in exactly the opposite direction to that in which she was walking.

"Oh, no, I wasn't," she said. "You see he comes down every evening, so it isn't a great event." And then she shook hands again, and laughed to herself all the way home at his abstraction. "I wonder what Millie has done to make him so mad?" she thought. "He looked as if he had never seen me before."

As a matter of fact Duke Cotterell thought he never had.

Ella forgot the whole incident in the absorption of pouring out her soul to Roudy. He listened attentively, regarding the slight figure in the arm-chairs, where she had thrown herself, with an indescribable expression, and once or twice he asked

a pertinent question, but did not laugh or treat her as an absurd child who was talking nonsense. Ella's eyes blazed with excitement as she talked to him, and her expressive face spoke also with every word, but her soul stood up comforted, and she lost the sore, hard feeling of being misunderstood.

"If they will not let me go I will run away!" she said childishly, but her mouth was quite firmly set. "And I will work my way up from the ranks if necessary, from the chorus and the supers—but I will never come back!"

"If they thought you were as firmly purposed as that, I think they would finally let you go," Roudy said quietly. "But it would be after a great deal of opposition and disapproval, Ella."

"I don't mind that. I must go—I feel it is in me. It is so strong in me that I would put everything on one side for it, even father and mother, and—and you. And I love you better than anyone else in the world, Roudy. But you understand how I feel, don't you?"

"I hear what you say, at least. But remember, Ella, if you are to succeed you would have to be thoroughly selfish. You would have to put everything else in your life on one side except this desire of yours. There is no half-heartedness in success—you can't do this thing and convert your family to it. Don't think it for a moment. You must do it without them—in spite of them—and probably they will never come round and agree with you to the end. To be thoroughly selfish one needs to be very strong."

Ella's little face was thoughtful as she leaned back in the armchair, and she did not speak for a time. At first her earnest eyes looked out into a

future which blotted out the long, low room, and Roudy, and everything around her. She was thinking over what he had said. But it had been a long and eventful day to her and she was tired. Gradually the blue eyes closed, a little gentle breath rose and fell on the silence, and, looking round from the table where he was writing letters, Roudy saw that she had fallen asleep.

He smiled, and, rising with less noise than seemed possible, went and leaned over her. Ella's soft cheek was towards him, but her head dropped a little away; Roudy slipped his strong fingers under her chin, and, turning her face, kissed her lips without waking her. Ella barely stirred, but a dream glided into her sleep that she had gained her heart's desire, and she gave a happy little sigh. Roudenham stood looking down on her for a moment; he was very fond of Ella, but he was not exactly thinking of her just then. He had kissed her because she was a girl, and because she was round and soft and young; but it was the girlhood that she represented to him in a general sense, rather than any personal sympathy, which had prompted the caress. He slipped the cushion more comfortably under her ruffled head, and then he went back to his letter. He was writing on foreign paper to the man in Africa whose friendship with him had so puzzled Beatrice Reeve, but for a time he did not continue. He sat and looked at the paper and pondered, and now and then he looked at Ella.

"When Mack next comes over it will be interesting to introduce him to Ella," thought Roudy, balancing the pen in his fingers and critically appreciating the shadow of Ella's eyelashes on her round cheek. "At present she has only realised that men

exist—across the footlights. She would seek Mack very much nearer at hand, though he is not much like Mr. Gerald Du Maurier. Still—I wonder! ”

It was a speculation that appealed to the impish side of his nature—a fascinating experiment. He laughed out loud, an amused laugh that grated in Ella's sleep and made her open her eyes.

“What are you plotting, Roudy?” she said dreamily. “I know there's something evil in the air—when you—laugh—like—that.”

“Nothing important at present, Ella. Go to sleep, again, my dear, and dream—of your future.”

CHAPTER VIII

“As for the girl, she turned to her new being,
Came, as a bird that hears its fellow call;
Blessed, as the blind that blesses God for seeing;
Grew, as a flower on which the sun-rays fall;
Loved if you will, she never named it so;
Love comes unseen—we only see it go.”

—AUSTIN DOBSON

R OUDENHAM'S family were never overburdened by his society at any time, but they saw less of him than ever after his chance visit to Piccadilly, for he took to going there after he left Lincoln's Inn, and he generally stayed to dinner. He had not seen much of his godfather since his boyhood for a variety of reasons. Roudy's experiences and interests resembled his father's in that they were very much wider than his family knew. If they had thought about the matter, Gay and Wilfred would have said, as Mr. Lipscombe did, “Roudy is no saint,” but they had never bestowed sufficient attention on him to know any-

thing about him, and would have been surprised had they for a moment realised how much they had confided in him without any return whatever. Roudy went his own way, and his godfather was not among the people he cultivated. Then when Lord Roudenham married he spent a longer time than most men over his honeymoon, for he was abroad for six months; on his return he took his wife to his country place, and the terms between the families being more that of traditional friendship than visiting acquaintance, Lady Roudenham had really only seen the younger members of the Solicitor's family once or twice, and that was but a passing glimpse.

The second time that Roudy called at the house in Piccadilly both Lord and Lady Roudenham were out; but the butler urged him to wait, as her ladyship was only driving in the park, and showed him into her own sitting-room. Roudy thought at first that it must be a sanctum of Lord Roudenham's, the absence of feminine tastes striking him in his surroundings, but on opening a book lying on the table he found Lena's name written in it, and then he changed his mind and took to studying her through her tastes, if by chance the room should be hers. The handwriting suggested a little to him, and the pictures on the walls still more; he was idle, and the unravelling of Lady Roudenham's character interested him.

When Lena came in she found him reading Emerson's Essays, and shook hands with him with frank pleasure.

"I am sorry I was out!" she said with unfeigned regret. "I seem fated to miss you some of the time that you are here."

"I have been devouring your books," he

answered smilingly. "Whenever I get into a fresh room an overpowering curiosity takes me straight to the bookcase."

"What did you discover? Is that Emerson? I was trying to find something you quoted the other night which I thought sounded like him—but I have not succeeded yet."

"It was more likely to be Thoreau," said Roudy. He showed no elation at her recollection of his words, and therefore Lena did not herself realise the compliment.

"I hope you will stay to dinner," she said, "for I am afraid Lord Roudenham will not be home until then. We have only one other man dining with us. He is a very dull M.P. with a theory about dog-biscuits being the only food for a siege—I do hope you will stay, it would be such a help!"

"To eat the dog-biscuits?"

"No—to leaven them! Mr. Lipscombe, I wish you had been with me yesterday. I went to Meyer's concert, and Palerme sang divinely!"

"I notice that most people go to concerts to hear someone else sing," remarked Roudy. "But I am a Palerme enthusiast myself."

"He sang 'I'll sing thee Songs of Araby.' Don't you think there ought to be a severe penalty on all inferior vocalists attempting a song which has once been perfectly rendered by a master? It is not such an achievement, perhaps, but it is as perfect in its way as his most brilliant rendering of Oratorio. I almost hope I shall never hear the 'Songs of Araby' sung again."

"I agree with you," said Roudy, rather comically. "My eldest brother has sung that song."

Lady Roudenham laughed in spite of herself. "I

did not know that your brothers could sing," she said.

"Please do not know it now, for they cannot. Millicent can twitter—but I am glad to say she generally keeps it for church—and Ella plays the violin a little. In some moods she plays very well, but she has to be roused to it. When she is in a passion her rendering of certain pieces is very fine."

"Is Ella the younger?" asked Lena, more quickly than she usually spoke. "I wish you would tell me more about your people. They interest me very much." She did not know whence the interest had sprung, but Roudy did, and he was rather amused. Until the evening when he dined here, Lena had known the family as figures in a distant landscape, which was just the effect they presented to her. But he did not doubt for a moment that they were becoming something more definite to her now.

"Millicent is at present saturated with parochial interests and the affairs of the neighbourhood," he said. "But a change is rapidly approaching." (Roudy saw more than he appeared to do.) "She is on the verge of an engagement to a good fellow who has no eyes in his head," he said enigmatically, for Ella had not thought to mention her encounter with Duke, and he was still in ignorance.

"And you think she will lose her interest in the parish for him?" said Lena thoughtfully. "Do you really think one's tastes and former feelings alter when one marries?"

"It depends on whether you are in love," said Roudy, looking her directly between the eyes. "Millicent is very sentimentally in love, and for a time she will attend football matches rather than

social evenings. The Curate has sunk into insignificance beside Cotterell—but he may reassert himself in the future.”

“But if she is so absorbed in this Mr. Cotterell——”

“It does not always last any more than it always comes,” said Roudy gently. “Some women marry with half their nature, and the other half lies dormant—and sometimes it goes just the other way and the interest dies out.”

There was a little line of pain between Lena’s brows. “Tell me about the other sister,” she said rather hurriedly.

“Ella is sixteen, and is still treated as a child by the family as long as they find it convenient to do so. When they wish to make her of use they demand that she shall be grown up at a minute’s notice—which she much resents. She is very nice, and she is going to be nicer still.”

“Oh!” said Lady Roudenham, thoughtfully. She began to see why Mr. Cotterell was represented without eyes. “I should like to see her. Have you a photograph?”

“I will bring it with me next time I come. But you will not see all her advantages, because she has pretty blue eyes and very dark hair, and the photo. will not tell you that.”

“But you have told me! You are fonder of her than of Millicent,” she asserted quickly.

“I like little girls,” said Roudy, coolly. “Ella wishes to go on the Stage, and is much disturbed in her mind because the proposition is not met with open arms. She told me all about it, and asserted in the same breath that she loved me better than anyone in the world and that she must go at once!”

"Do you think she would make a good actress?"

"Yes, I think she would," said Roudy, critically. "She has a very mobile face and quick sympathies. And she is enthusiastic enough to work hard. But she ought to train at once, and that, of course, she is not allowed to do."

"Could you not help her?—with your father and mother, I mean."

"If the taste were strong enough she would need no help," Roudy said quietly. "But I do not think it is. She will fail through her affections, not being sufficiently hard to put everything and everybody on one side. Of course she does not think so. She threatened to run away the other day and work her way up from the bottom of the ladder. She is more practical in her suggestions than one would expect."

"Oh, I hope she will not!" Lena exclaimed anxiously. "How terrible! She does not realise what it would be like. Has she friends in London?"

"I think not."

"I wish she would come to me if she were in any difficulty—if she did really run away, I mean," Lady Roudenham said earnestly. "Mr. Lipscombe, don't let her do anything reckless!"

"Are you not overrating my influence?"

"Why, no—not if she is so fond of you!"

"It does not follow that I can influence her, though. She will influence herself far more. I never attempt to manage other people's lives, but I stand by and watch."

"While they mismanage their own!"

"Certainly; we must all bear the consequences of our own actions or we might just as well be

dummy figures. It isn't really kind to steal anybody's experience."

"But pain looks such a terrible thing!" said Lena thoughtfully. "It would be irresistible to me to save anybody for whom I cared from suffering—however much they lost in another way."

"We are getting rather deep, are we not?" Roudy suggested quizzically. "I have no right to visit my theories on your head. They are rather sombre, I fear—probably from my own inevitable experience."

He smiled as he said it, and it seemed to her the more pathetic.

"If you will come into the drawing-room I will sing or play to you as you asked," she said, catching at the first thing she could think of to give him pleasure on the impulse of pity.

"I will come further than the drawing-room to hear you sing," he said laughing. "I wish you could hear your own voice! It has such a beautiful quality."

Lena flushed a little, but it was from pleasure and not embarrassment. "I will confess to you what I have not to anyone else," she said. "I love singing partly because I feel my voice is good, and I like to use it. It is so grand to feel it swelling out and filling the room and to exult in my own power. Giving pleasure to someone else is only half the enjoyment—but then I am so seldom conscious of giving pleasure that perhaps it excuses the selfishness a little."

Roudy chose his seat where he could see her face and watch her hands on the keys, and was quietly studying her while he thoroughly enjoyed the music. After a while Lena forgot him and sang her heart out, inspired by some sympathy of being

appreciated and yet not conscious of an audience the whole time. She had really a beautiful voice, and when she sang a song she loved—"The Rapture of the Night," for instance—her sleeping soul awoke for the moment and asserted a larger life so long as the music lasted. Roudy watched her curiously when she turned round from the piano at last and the momentary emotion in her face subsided to her usual look of calm contemplation.

"I am afraid you must be growing tired," she said apologetically. "But you were so quiet that I forgot to leave off."

"You forgot me, rather," said Roudy serenely. "But I was content to be forgotten."

Lena did not answer, for she was startled to find that her eyes were wet and her hands rather unsteady. "How absurdly emotional!" she thought. "I hope he did not see."

Lord Roudenham came in soon afterwards, and the conversation became more impersonal. Roudy stayed to dinner and helped to discuss dog-biscuits, and the M.P. told his host that that unfortunate young man had been compensated by nature for the misfortune of such a body by possessing a very exceptional mind. "Yes, he is a clever fellow—quite a remarkable conversationalist," said Lord Roudenham, complacently; and he began to feel a certain satisfaction in Roudy, as though he had acquired a new and valuable possession. He pressed him to come again, and would have fixed a day if Roudy had allowed him. Lady Roudenham was not so pressing as before, because she was very much more anxious that he should come. She said, quite calmly, "We shall hope to see you soon," and speculated inwardly as to whether he would come during the next week. But her desire

that he should had grown so much more earnest that she abstained from any further invitation, and regretted it for days after lest she should herself have prevented his coming by her lack of cordiality. She thought of him a great deal more, however, and allowed the subject to take possession of her mind. She thought also of what he had told her about his sisters, and tried to gain a further knowledge of him through them. Ella's affection—which he had mentioned half satirically—seemed to betray something different to what he had represented himself.

"I should think one could grow very fond of him," she thought. "Being a cripple cannot make him less attractive—and he is so quietly independent and self-reliant. I like him—I like him very much, and I hope I shall see more of him."

She began to think she had been foolish not to be as frankly cordial as Lord Roudenham. The cripple could not have understood her reason, poor fellow, and she must have seemed cold and indifferent. Perhaps he thought she had grown weary of him—poor Roudy! and he was sensitive and easily repulsed, of course. Lena tortured herself for a week, and then she made a little effort and wrote to him asking him to come on a certain afternoon to hear a pianist who was amongst her visiting acquaintance. Roudy went, and found himself on a friendlier footing still.

The more he came to the house the more they grew into companionship. Lena had never heretofore taken the trouble to know any man intimately save Lord Roudenham, whom she knew because she saw him daily and they were necessarily in closer intercourse; or perhaps it was rather that circumstances had never driven her beyond ac-

quaintanceship with any of the men in her own set. Roudenham Lipscombe was no cleverer than many with whom she was brought in contact, but because she had greater opportunities of studying him she discovered qualities which she fancied had been lacking in other men. She was somewhat slow of nature, but she was correspondingly deep and thorough, and what womanly quickness and intuition she lacked she made up for in the more masculine attribute of a tenacious hold of anything once acquired. Her friendship with Roudy grew into her nature and gradually dominated her. It came to be a real thing in her life, so that the level emotionless existence she had led before appeared the more artificial by contrast. The people she met and talked with seemed like a dream or like characters in a play, and she caught herself smiling absently as at a show. Only now and then some chance word might sting her into resentment of their empty existence; otherwise, they were too like machines to affect her at all.

On one occasion a lady of title asked her to help at a bazaar in which she was herself interested, because the clergyman of the church she attended possessed a charming manner and came to her afternoon teas to urge it on her. "Lady Roudenham is just the sort of person to help in a charitable object," she said. "She is one of those grave people with principles but no character. It will be a further charity to ask her to take a stall, and will interest her far more than Ascot or Henley." Lena did not guess the lady's reasons for asking her, but she turned to a man at her side and asked the object of the charity.

He was an irreproachable young man whose affectations rather obscured his good qualities.

"Oh, it's bein' got up for a Crippled Home—funds y' know," he said. "Awfully good object, don't y' think? Awfully sorry for cripples m'self—can't imagine how they can exist at all, y'know. Always think it would be kinder to put them out of existence when they're born, poor devils!"

Lady Roudenham's large, quiet eyes darkened as they dwelt upon his. She was contrasting his vapid face and immaculate figure with another which she knew, and wondering whether he would feel any humiliation if he could once realise that the life which he would fain have exterminated was infinitely more valuable than his own to her mind. Yet if she had known it his objectless words were somewhat similar to the view held by Roudy's own aunt, Madame Le Marchant, for whom Lena had a sincere liking.

For Madame Le Marchant had fulfilled her threat of calling upon Lady Roudenham, and had been graciously received. She had taken a fancy to Lena, and said with terrible frankness that she was thrown away upon that aristocratic effigy, her husband. But, of course, there were advantages—Roudenham Hall, for instance, and the house in Piccadilly, whose quiet sober state pleased her. It was terribly English, she said, solidly English—as rich and substantial as the national roast beef, but it was well bred and not middle-class, and she was being sickened of middle-class things at Battersea.

On the whole she enjoyed her visit, the one drawback to which was that she found her nephew, Roudy Lipscombe, there. Roudy had been talking business with his godfather, and he came into the drawing-room after a while to find his aunt having tea with Lady Roudenham. He came in quite naturally, too, and Lady Roudenham looked up

with a smile and offered him tea as though he were not at all a stranger. Madame Le Marchant was more surprised than pleased. It was natural that Roudy should be the one of the family to visit there, but she wished his visit had not chimed in with hers, and when he serenely suggested escorting her on her homeward way she accepted his company with some dubiousness.

"Shall I see you on Thursday?" Lena said to him as they shook hands. "You have been with Lord Roudenham all the afternoon, and now you are going at once! I wanted to talk to you a little myself." She was always quite outspoken with him now, and did not attempt any more to disguise her pleasure in his society.

"I am afraid I shall not be up again this week," he answered, smiling. "I think I am going to have a bad time of it, my back is very painful to-day."

Lena's face was a curious mixture of anxiety and sympathy and tenderness. "Oh, I wish you could be here!" she exclaimed involuntarily. "I am rather a good sick nurse."

"I am not at all a good patient," he returned, laughing. "You do not know how cross I can be. I am only fit to be left to myself."

"I should not mind," she answered rather breathlessly.

"No, perhaps not—but I should," he said, as he went away.

"I shall drive to Victoria, and go down by train," Madame announced, as they left the house. She shook a fearful and wonderful parasol threateningly at a passing taxi and helped her nephew in. "Lady Roudenham is a charming woman, and could be fascinating," she said in her most didactic tones

as they drove off. "But she does not know it, and her husband will never help her to find out. He does not see it himself—I don't believe he sees her half the time." •

"There is a blindness very prevalent in the married state," remarked Roudy. "It is a special provision of Nature."

Madame regarded him with intense distaste. "I suppose," she said bitinglly, "that that is one of those remarks which gain you your reputation for cleverness!"

"On the contrary," said Roudy politely, "that is one of those remarks which lose me my reputation!"

Madame did not see her way to a retort, and glared herself into silence.

CHAPTER IX

"Be happy then, my lovin' birds;
God bless true sweethearts! Them's the words—
A holier thing, and no mistake in,
He never made in all his makin'—
True as steel—but don't forget,
He's walkin' in the Garden yet!"

—T. E. BROWN

GAY LIPSCOMBE was said to possess the nicest boat on the river. It was not an entirely satisfactory reputation, because other men had a tendency to borrow, or else had boats built on exactly the same lines, which annoyed Gay, who had taken some pains in designing and improving on other models. His brother was the worst offender in borrowing, but that was to be expected. Agnes remarked rather comically that Wilfred

thought the universe was made for him, and would never lose it for any hesitation in asking; but, as a matter of fact, neither she nor her husband resented Wilfred's easy appropriation of anything that took his fancy as they would have done anyone else's. Wilfred was universally popular; he was so good-looking, and as a rule so even tempered, that if he were somewhat masterful it did not seem to go ill with his emphatic young manhood. Agnes and Gay spoilt him rather after Millicent's manner, and regarded him with an indulgence they did not extend to any other member of the family. Agnes was fond of both her sisters-in-law, but of course she knew Millicent very much the better of the two. She never expressed an opinion of Roudenhams. Gay said in his considerate fashion that Roudy was a sensible fellow—and added vaguely that he was clever without being effeminate, but Agnes held her peace. She agreed in silence that Roudy was clever—once she had been somewhat startled at his cleverness. It was soon after her marriage. She never referred to the subject, but her experience had made her cautious, and she cultivated Wilfred rather than his brother.

Wilfred used to go down to Surbiton on most Saturday afternoons, and took Duke Cotterell with him. Sometimes Gay or Agnes went with them—sometimes not; but they were always welcome to the boat. It happened one Saturday that Roudy had stayed in town; he went to Piccadilly, but the household at The Acacias did not know this, principally because he never tried to conceal his destination—and Millicent beguiled Ella, an unwilling victim, to a local tennis party. The Curate was the only man there, because Wilfred declined to go for reasons best known to himself. He had grown dignified about local affairs lately, and treated all

places where he might meet Beatrice Reeve with studied indifference. This was hard on Millicent, who not only lost his escort, but lost Duke Cotterell's also, that young man being generally swept off in another direction by his more energetic friend; but Wilfred was too busy over his own injuries and his new attitude of superiority to think of anyone else, and tennis parties saw him not. He took Duke with him on this occasion, and went down to Surbiton; they got on to the river about four, and pulled up to Molesey lock, where they found themselves in a jam of acquaintances.

"By Jove, there's Dalroyd!" said Wilfred, looking at a boat on the opposite side of the lock to where he was keeping his bow away from the stone; "I haven't seen him for ages. Pretty girl with him, too!" His eyes were fixed in gracious approval on the girl rather than on Dalroyd. Cotterell followed his glance.

"Didn't you know? He's married. That's his wife."

"By Jove!" was all Wilfred said again; but as soon as they got out of the lock they followed the newly married pair by tacit consent, and coming alongside rested on their sculls for a few minutes' conversation. Dalroyd looked very well—disgustingly so—and quite brown and fat. He had been a more rabid anti-marrying man than Wilfred, and most of that young gentleman's theories were originally learned of him, but he did not seem in the least abashed. On the contrary he appeared to be swelling with pride as he introduced his friends to the brown-eyed girl in the smart shirt and Panama hat, who was certainly most charming in manner and appearance. It was all very depressing. I often think that his former friends must have shunned Benedict after the mean way in which he

ratted—particularly if Beatrice were as successful a wife as she promised to be.

Wilfred and Duke moved on after a few minutes; they pulled rather slowly and silently, and their thoughts appeared to be otherwhither.

"I can't think how Dalroyd could afford to marry!" Wilfred said at last in a disparaging tone. "I should need to be a good deal better off than he is before I went and asked a girl to have me!"

"Yes," Duke agreed. "They'll regret it before long, I expect."

There was a silence, while it is to be presumed they congratulated themselves on their freedom.

"They look very jolly at present," Duke remarked grudgingly at last. "Mrs. Dalroyd's ripping on the water!"

"She's good-looking. No smarter than heaps of other girls, though," Wilfred said hastily.

"No," Duke agreed.

Silence again; after a minute Wilfred gave a short laugh. "Well, personally I don't care about marriage on too small an income," he said. "Besides, I don't think a man wants to tie himself until he's thirty."

"N-no," said Cotterell, in a slightly uncertain tone. "You feel such a cad asking a girl to leave a comfortable home and put up with your lack of means for the pleasure of your society! Most likely she wouldn't have you if you did, too."

"No, by Jove! You never know what girls *do* want! If you think you're pretty chummy ten chances to one they'll cold-shoulder you at a minute's notice for no reason at all!"

"Of course, it's all syrup being engaged——"

"Is it though! My dear fellow, a long engagement is the very deuce, and it's as bad for the girl

as the man." Wilfred spoke in an assured tone that did not even convince himself.

Another pause.

"Well, I call it beastly selfish of Dalroyd!"

They went home sooner than they had intended, for the river had lost its charm. On the way down they passed Mr. and Mrs. Dalroyd again, she leaning back and playing idly with the lines, and he messing about with his sculls—manifestly doing no work. They did not appear to have moved half a mile. Wilfred said no wonder Dalroyd was putting on flesh if he had grown such a lazy brute, and grew almost bitter for days afterwards about the idiots who went and choked up the river, doing nothing.

The immediate effect upon Duke Cotterell was a deep depression, with phases of dark calculations about ways and means, and the chances for and against Millie Lipscombe thinking it good enough. Like many other young men Duke had intended to have his fling out before he settled, and not to marry for years yet, and his theories melted like snow before his growing inclination. But he was sufficiently diffident to hesitate. His father was connected with some electric light works, and was comfortably off, and Duke himself was in the same firm. He could marry, as City clerks do, on his three or four hundred a year, and his prospects were moderately safe; but he was, if anything, below the Lipscombes socially, and then Milly might not care for him. He was not more than averagely conceited, this pleasant, ordinary young Englishman—not so conceited as Wilfred, indeed—and in spite of the nonsense they talked neither of the two really thought they had only to ask and to have.

Things came to a crisis one evening at The Acacias when Duke had not intended it at all. It was Sunday evening, and very still. Millicent's conscience had acquitted her, and she had gone into the conservatory instead of to church. Duke had not got on a particularly becoming coat, nor had he brushed his hair smooth and brought a Homburg hat to play with; in fact he was unprepared. He was standing beside Millicent with his hands in his pockets and his face looking rather moody, hardly conscious that he was alone with her indeed, when she began to talk about cricket with intent to interest him.

"Are you playing down here next week? I see your club is coming," she said.

"Yes—no—I think not," said Duke absently, his eyes following the curve of her cheek as she bent to pick a dead leaf off a plant.

"Why, I thought they depended on you as their steadiest bat!"

"I believe so," Duke responded in the same tone.

"Mr. Cotterell, I don't believe you are listening!" Millicent said, in really innocent surprise.

Duke roused himself. "I don't believe I was," he said, laughing constrainedly. "I was thinking about you!"

He spoke in such an odd tone that Millicent turned round to look at him. Duke's throat felt strange and tight, and no words would come. They looked at each other for a minute, the girl bewildered, and the man speechless with his own excitement, and then he said, "Millie!" and put his arm round her, and they kissed each other without another word of explanation.

When Duke did recover himself sufficiently he combined a somewhat confused apology with his

proposal, but even then his voice sounded strange and loud, which surprised him as much as a like experience had Ella when she told her mother that she wanted to go on the Stage. It was a very ordinary proposal in very ordinary words, and Millicent's assenting answer was after the manner of millions of women before her; they were in fact two very ordinary young people in a suburban conservatory, but for that time at least in all their lives they were something out of the common to each other.

It is wonderful how easy it is to pass from the limits of mere acquaintanceship to the license of familiarity. A dead leaf was obliging enough to fall upon Millicent's head; Duke picked it off lingeringly, and went on touching her hair with the pride of possession, and then Millie laid her head against his shoulder, and the conservatory became a temporary Eden. They were recalled to the passing of time and the appalling intrusiveness of mundane things by the glass doors opening without ceremony and Ella's voice saying, "I say, it's nearly half-past eight. Aren't you two coming in to supper?"

Supper! Cold roast lamb and pickles, with spongy puddings to follow! The delirium of the moment faded before Ella's announcement, and both Duke and Millicent stood looking rather foolish in the dusk, before the accusation of a neglected supper. It made them feel as though they had not been hungry, which seemed to their guilty minds conclusive evidence.

Ella stood in the half-open door regarding them with impatient amusement. She would have guessed nothing if they had not been so obvious. As it was, she wondered, in schoolgirl fashion, if

they had been "spooning," and the thought was followed by one of blank amazement that *Millie could*—with Duke Cotterell! Her blue eyes dwelt upon them for a moment in wonder before she vanished as abruptly as she came, leaving Duke with an irritated sense of her personality. He had forgotten his meeting with Ella outside *Mon Désir*, but now it was recalled to his mind. He would be perpetually seeing those eyes in Millicent's shadow. Without them, he would have been so royally content! He felt it a distinct injury that just as he had come to the conclusion that he was absolutely in love with Millicent, and that to marry her was the best thing that life held for him, he should be suddenly made aware of Ella's tempting individuality, beyond his reach. He was glad that she hardly looked at him during supper—as a fact Ella had begun to feel embarrassed in her turn, and to wonder if they were sitting hand in hand—and that she was at the further end of the table, but she distracted his thoughts sufficiently to prevent his observing that Roudenham was inciting his mother to urge everything on the table upon Millicent, and pointing out that she was eating nothing.

"My dear Millie, do have a little wine!" said Mrs. Lipscombe anxiously—she was always ready to cosset her family—"I am afraid you feel the heat. I have noticed that your appetite is not so good as usual for the last few days. Mary, fill Miss Millicent's glass!"

Ella watched the maid take the decanter round in fascinated horror. There was a little fuss and pause as she tried to reach Millicent's glass, and there seemed to be some difficulty in getting between the chairs.

THERE WAS A CROOKED MAN

"Millie, move a little!" Roudy said solicitously, bending across the table. "Mary can't get to your glass—you are sitting so near Cotterell."

Ella caught the concluding sentence, and her discomfiture changed to wild mirth. But it was too bad of Roudy! She saw Millicent push her chair abruptly away, and turn to refuse the wine almost querulously, and she flashed a look of mingled reproach and amusement at Roudenham.

"My dear, I really wish you to have another glass," said Mrs. Lipscombe with growing anxiety. "I am sure you are not looking at all well. Very well, then, I shall insist on your taking a tonic."

Wilfred came unconsciously to the rescue. "You are so fond of giving medicines, mother!" he said, in lordly tones. "They do no good really. A brisk walk before breakfast, or a little exercise with light clubs, would do Millie more good than all the tonics in the world. She doesn't do enough work."

"When mother goes to Heaven," put in Roudy thoughtfully, "she will walk about shaking a bottle and dosing the cherubim, and they will call her the Dispensing Angel!"

"I wish you wouldn't be irreverent, Roudenham!" Millicent collected herself sufficiently to say.

"Richard is himself again," murmured Roudy for all response.

It was rather a relief to Ella when the engagement was an established fact, and she could rattle door-handles before she entered rooms, and fly out of the way of the lovers, with reason. It could not be termed an entirely satisfactory engagement, and perhaps the solicitor and his wife had some cause to feel that they might have expected Millicent to make a better match. But there was nothing to say against Duke Cotterell personally, and Millie's characteristic firmness—not to say obstinacy—made

itself felt in this case so decidedly that both her parents tacitly acknowledged the uselessness of opposing her. There was no doubt about her own inclination, and her happiness had such a softening effect that she took to confiding in Ella, and forbore to snub her on several occasions when they chanced to differ.

On the whole the worst moment to Duke was telling Wilfred. The latter's "Of course I'm awfully glad, old chap—wish you joy. Rather it were you than anyone, and Millie's a good sort," had an "Et tu, Brute!" flavour about it for all its heartiness. And Wilfred could not keep a certain hard satire out of his voice and expression, though he forbore to remind Duke of his former vows of celibacy. Wilfred had gained a year's experience in the past month; he was graver than he had been, and it became him. Beatrice's neglect had done him good, though he hardly realised the situation; nor could he be angry and visit his resentment on a rival, for he had none that he could acknowledge. That was the worst of coming in conflict with Roudy; people always began by thinking that his peculiar position would handicap him, and ended by finding that it had handicapped them, for who can challenge a wounded man?

A serious contemplation of the engaged couple resulted, in Ella's case, in grave disenchantment. "I shouldn't say so to everyone, Roudy," she remarked in confidence, "but I do think that Millie and Duke are the most uninteresting couple I ever saw."

"Doesn't he wear his hair long enough?" asked Roudenham.

"Don't be silly! Of course I don't mean that. Only he is ordinary, isn't he?"

"Rather, a recommendation, surely."

"Is it? But how can Millie—" She broke off abruptly. "I went into the morning room just now, and they seem to have grown used to me, or they think it doesn't matter. They never moved."

"Go on."

"Well, I think it's disgusting!"

"H'm! Mutual economy of space, I suppose. They all do it, Ella. You'll find out why, some day."

"Never! I won't be vulgar, anyhow."

"Won't you? Wait and see. It's the most natural thing in the world." The corners of his mouth lifted in the old cynical fashion. "Eve sat on Adam's knee in the Garden of Eden, and the snake looked on and sneered."

"Then he probably looked just like you do now, Roudy!" Ella retorted.

"Exactly. He knew he was out of it. We have a right to sneer, he and I."

Ella's eyes were very blue as she looked at him. "I like you—and snakes!—better than Adam!" she said.

CHAPTER X

"Man is fire, and woman is tow,
And the Devil comes and begins to blow!"

—OLD SAW

LADY ROUDENHAM was driving in the Park. It was very crowded, for the Queen was passing through, and the carriages were stopped every few yards as they rounded the corner, and sometimes could only proceed at a walk. Lord Roudenham still kept a carriage in preference to a motor car; he liked the old-fashioned dignity of it. As she leaned back in her seat, Lena could see her coach-

man square himself to hold in the bay horses when they came to a standstill; she was looking straight before her mechanically, from Thomas's sober livery to the neat black figure of Julie beside him, for she was one of the few who took their maid with them on the box in place of a footman. It was a piece of thoughtful consideration for the girl which Society regarded with hopeless amusement as one of Lady Roudenham's eccentricities; but Julie's life seemed very monotonous and barren of interest to her mistress, and she frequently took her in the Park instead of another manservant. Julie enjoyed the drive far more than her ladyship, and the society of Thomas was agreeable to her. Lena knew this. She had become much more intuitive and quickened in her sympathies of late.

To and fro went the pedestrians, and up and down went the carriages. Lena's grave eyes turned to the moving crowd in the same absent fashion as she had watched the coachman; she was thinking of other things half the time, until the toss of the horses' heads and the easy bowling of the carriages, the glimmer of beautiful fabrics, and the passing of well-bred faces—plain and pretty, indifferent and animated—became like a gay-coloured panorama, one more demonstration of the lifeless pageant of her outward existence. Now and then she bowed to an acquaintance with a faint smile on her lips which were trained to smile for courtesy's sake; but she barely moved or altered her position, leaning back in lonely state with one hand resting on the collar of the D'Eresby pug, who gravely filled the place beside her. Toby was the only other occupant of the carriage; he sat up in a well-behaved fashion, as if conscious of the onus of his position, and his round dark eyes stared at the crowd unblinkingly.

The panorama seemed more lifeless than usual to Lady Roudenham to-day, in contrast to her own awakening life which throbbed steadily beneath her calm exterior. She looked at the faces, and tried to realise that these also had separate existences, that some absorbing interest lay in the heart of each of these, making the world an important reality to them as to her. So much already had the growing consciousness in her revealed that the people she met were no longer dummies, but human beings who would possibly be of interest and value to her if she could only get nearer to them. She regarded them wistfully, as though she saw them through plate glass, but to know them really seemed a hopeless task; she felt more in sympathy with the old beggar woman crossing the road, whom the policeman looked at with distrust, than in all that gay crowd. They seemed to her all so devoid of variety, so set in one smooth groove; this very driving in the Park was typical of the narrow round of social life. Up and down, up and down, always passing close to the rails by Achilles' statue, always turning at the same point where the red rhododendrons blazed in the border and driving back again, so that the absolute space they covered was reducible to a measure of yards. Why did Thomas always turn at that rhododendron bush? Could he not for once drive as far as the barracks, or a little beyond the statue? But Thomas knew his business better, and the law of the Park which is the law of a limited fashion. Nobody who was anybody went beyond the rhododendrons, and there was nothing there worth looking at. The Countess of Roudenham's carriage kept the beaten track.

Lena sighed a little at the seventh turn, and shifted Toby's collar to bring the silver ring uppermost. The dog shook his head and set the bells

ringing; Lena felt as if she must give the same impatient movement. The restless, uneasy life in her veins, and the quickened pulses which caused her to start in new and painful surprise, made this observance of routine almost unbearable. She endured it because she had always done so, and she could give no reason now for altering; but she was unhappy, and at times a vague disturbing fear beset her for the cause of her inquietude. Some change was taking place in her, life was leaving its narrow bounds and widening out; but the sensation was strange and painful, like the first movements of a limb of which the joints have stiffened from disuse. As yet she asked herself no questions, only sometimes the sight of her own face with a new look upon it startled even her. She seemed to have gained a more vivid expression, almost a more emphatic colouring, as if Nature would express in outward signs the life unfolding within.

"There's a handsome woman," one man said to another as her carriage passed. "Who is she?"

"Lady Roudenham. You know her, surely!"

"Was it? Why, yes, I must have met her. But her face seems to have altered. She has more expression—she never struck me before. Is she developing into a beauty?"

"I fancy she was always good-looking in a cold, unattractive fashion. She used to be too quiet—one of those women who would be dowdy if they were not so well-bred—but she has certainly become more apparent lately. She is really beautiful when she smiles."

Lena was rather glad when Thomas turned the bays out of the Park, and she found herself proceeding up Piccadilly. As they pulled up before her own door a glazier with a large sheet of glass under his arm was passing along the pavement, which

made Lena pause as she was about to get out of the carriage. Now something in this glazier must have offended Toby—usually the most decorous of pugs—or he fancied his mistress insulted by having to wait for a workman, but when Lena least expected it he jumped out of the carriage before her and began barking furiously round the man's ankles. The workman started and dodged, trying to avoid the dog, and Lena called "Toby! Toby!" but as the animal turned to run back the glazier caught his foot, tripped over him, and down came the sheet of glass with a tremendous crash on the pavement.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" Lena exclaimed, going to the rescue both of the dismayed workman and her pet. "You must please let me pay for it—it was Toby's fault. In whose employ are you?"

The man told her, with a ludicrous mingling of relief and dejection on his face, and Lena took down the name. Then she turned to look for the dog, who crept out of the ruins a very crushed and humiliated pug indeed, limping on three legs, and with blood flowing freely from the paw he held up as if for Lena's inspection, while his round eyes spoke eloquent reproach. "How can you have allowed this to happen to me?" they seemed to say. "I was doing my best in your service!"

"Oh, poor Toby!" Lena exclaimed, and catching the little fellow up in her arms she hurried into the house, regardless of the stains on her gown, and concerned only that Toby's paw was still bleeding, and he was evidently in pain, for he struggled in her arms.

The butler met her as she crossed the hall, and detained her. "Mr. Lipscombe is here, m'lady," he said. "He came about ten minutes ago. His lordship is out."

"Where is he?" Lena asked briefly, pausing at

the foot of the staircase with Toby pressed against her breast.

It appeared that Roudy was in her own sitting-room, whither she generally invited him of late. Without waiting for more Lena ran upstairs and into the room breathlessly.

"Poor Toby has met with an accident," she said hurriedly, with no more conventional greeting. "He has cut his paw, and he struggles so! I am almost afraid of his biting me. What shall I do?"

Roudy was sitting by the table turning over the leaves of a book of engravings. He pushed it away quickly, and held out his hands for the dog.

"Let me look at him," he said quietly. "Gently, Toby! No bones broken, are there, old fellow? No—only a cut, and no glass in that. Run and get me a sponge and some cold water and a rag," he added to Lena in a tone of authority. "As quickly as you can."

She turned away to do the behest herself instead of ringing for her servants. The minute Roudy had taken the dog on his knee the animal had ceased to struggle, and now lay still, feebly licking the hands that held him. Lena brought what he asked for with a feeling of relief and confidence that quieted her nerves and made her deft to help him as he directed. She held Toby while he bathed the bleeding paw, and bound it firmly with the rag, and the dog hardly whined.

"There, that's as scientific as though I were House-Surgeon at Guy's," he said whimsically. "There is a good doctor spoiled in me."

Lena did not answer. Her eyes were gazing, as if fascinated, at the large strong hands which managed the bandage so skilfully. How marvelously sympathetic his touch must be, and how

tenderly he must be handling that paw for Toby to lick his fingers so gratefully!

"You want a needle and a thread, don't you?" she said with an effort.

"If you please."

She sent for Toby's basket when the bandage was sewn, and the invalid was deposited in it, where he lay in state, condescending to be fed with sweet biscuits and milk, and evidently feeling that terrible things had happened to him, and he was an object of interest and experience.

"You have a great gift with animals," Lena remarked once without looking at her guest.

"It is hardly that so much as the power of knowledge in this case. Toby felt by the way I handled him that I knew what I was about."

"You have learned surgery?"

"I have learned a few things not taught in ambulance lectures. But bandaging requires more skill than appears. It wants a very nice adjustment to get it neither too tight nor too loose."

"Yes," she said, as though pondering. "But—I do not think it was only that."

A curious silence seemed to fall upon her during the evening. Lord Roudenham was not quick to observe, but he was careful and considerate, and when it dawned upon him that the conversation had been limited to him and his godson he regarded his wife with some disturbance in his immovable face.

"My dear Lena, you are not as usual. Are you unwell?" he asked, with tactless solicitude.

They were at dinner, and Lena was somewhat hastily refusing a dish handed to her. A slow painful blush dyed her face as she turned her head.

"I have a headache," she said quietly, her eyes straying as though against her will to Roudy's

hand resting on the table beside his plate. She was noticing with a kind of frightened fascination the breadth across the knuckles and the suggestive suppleness of the fingers. The idea of that hand took possession of her, until she counted the minutes breathlessly to the time when he should leave and she must lay her own in it. She chafed against the power that mastered her, and could have struck herself for such folly, and yet though the revelation of her own weakness terrified her she could not escape from it. It seemed to her that her eyes were suddenly opened to a horrible fate to which she was being drawn irresistibly, and through the crawling moments of that interminable dinner her brain, a traitor to her, presented the gradual development of the past month in a procession of incidents. The first time she had made the effort to say Roudy as her husband did, instead of the more formal "Mr. Lipscombe"—why had it been an effort? Why had she secretly enjoyed the familiarity after the first nervousness until (she knew it now) her lips pronounced the name with a softer intonation than others? And since a day on which he had asked her to sing "The Rapture of the Night," and mentioned that he liked that the best of her songs, for it was the first he had heard her sing—had it not gained a sacredness of its own? Did she not shrink from singing it to anyone else, and keep it set apart for him? The little details which rose up in condemnation before her seemed to her more terrible than the thing they proved.

Roudy took his leave soon after dinner. Lena watched him take his crutches and drag himself to his feet, and heard his farewell to her husband

with mechanical self-control. Then he turned to her.

"I shall come in on Thursday—this is Tuesday, isn't it?—to see how Toby's paw gets on, and I will dress it again if you like to leave it until then."

"Thank you," she said breathlessly.

"Good-bye."

He held out his hand at last. Lena drew her breath, and tried to put her own into it, but in the second before she conquered her nerve she looked up and met his eyes with the desperate appeal of a hunted animal. She could not tell what he thought before she looked down again with a giddy feeling upon her, but conscious that the clasp of his hand was keeping her from falling.

She was a proud woman. As she heard the door close behind him without turning round she tasted a bitterness of humiliation that was keener than physical pain. She had thought herself strong, and behold she was pitifully weak. She had been secure in her indifferent self-assurance, in the passionless safety of her own control—and she was proved as vulnerable as the merest schoolgirl. With a revulsion of feeling she shuddered at herself, and drew back from her weaker instincts with disdain.

"Are you not going to the Stanways to-night?" Lord Roudenham said in surprise, coming up to her as she leaned at the window with her forehead resting against the cold glass.

"I think not—I am too tired."

"Is your head so bad, dear? Shall I tell your maid to bring you some salts?"

"It does not matter—I will go and lie down. Toby had an accident this afternoon, and it

frightened me. He nearly knocked down a man with some glass and got himself cut."

"Yes, so Roudy was telling me."

Lena turned away abruptly. "I will go and lie down," she repeated.

She determined to conquer her weakness and crush it; she had never had an emotion that she could not control. It was impossible that this could be too strong for her. She walked up and down her own room feverishly with her hands clenched and her eyes looking hopelessly before her. Her maid, watching in mingled surprise and pity, thought how terrible the pain must be that could make her look like that.

Roudy had said he would come on Thursday. The Roudenhams were dining out that night, but he was only going to look in on his way from business to see Toby. On the day in question Lena examined the bandaged paw with hesitating interest. The memory of Roudy's hands was growing intolerable, until she felt that she could not see him handle the dog again. And then an overwhelming impulse seized her—she had a craving to be in Toby's place, to feel those strong fingers binding her own wrist. It would be impossible for him to guess that it was any less an accident than Toby's. She took up a little silver-mounted penknife on her dressing-table and opened it; then she looked at her wrist and dropped it with a shudder. What folly! As if—— A clock in the house struck four. Still she hesitated—he would be here soon. There! A bell rang—the front door shut. She caught the open knife, and turning her head aside drew it sharply across her wrist. The sudden smart and the squirt of blood made her sick and faint, and she dropped into a

chair trembling; but feet were coming along the passage—there was a knock at the door—they had sent to tell her.

When the maid opened the door and said, "Mr. Lipscombe is here, m'lady," her mistress was standing before the glass twisting her handkerchief round her wrist, and her calm "Very well, Julie," was as even and undisturbed as ever.

Lena's step grew slower as it reached the door of her sitting-room. She half hesitated, and then came into the room without looking at its only occupant in her customary direct fashion.

"How is Toby?" Roudy said as they shook hands.

"Toby is getting on very well—he is beginning to use his paw. I am the invalid to-day."

She was rather pale as she held up her left hand with the handkerchief twisted round the wrist, but she smiled slightly, though still she did not look at him.

"Ah!" said Roudy. It seemed to Lena that there was a breathless pause, yet his next speech was as natural and easy as ever.

"Have you cut yourself?" he said. "Let me look. You know I am something of a surgeon." He unbound the handkerchief and took her wrist in his hands. Lena sat down beside him with her face turned away, for she could not stand, and she feared to look.

"A nasty cut," said Roudy coolly, pressing the edges together. "Did I hurt you? You winced."

"I am sorry—I did not mean to. I suppose a wet rag will stop the bleeding?"

"I am going to ring for the same paraphernalia as I had for Toby with your permission," he said, touching the bell. He asked for what he wanted

himself, Lena sitting still in silence, and when it was brought unbound the handkerchief again from the wrist which he still held.

"I won't hurt you if I can help it," he said gently.

Suddenly the tears welled into her eyes.

"Oh, I am sorry," she said hopelessly. "Only I—was frightened."

He looked out of the window as the train bore of his fingers tightened—but that might be to close the wound. Also she thought he looked at her; possibly he was calculating the chances of her fainting, for she knew she was very white. He sponged away the blood deftly, and began to adjust the linen bandage. His powerful hands moved deliberately about their task, almost as though he lingered; she sighed a little, and for the moment yielded herself to the insane pleasure of his touch. She had risked much for this—she would enjoy it to the full.

"I am dining out to-night," she said as he sewed the bandage. "Could you make it a little less thick? I suppose I can get a glove on."

"You cannot indeed. Don't attempt it. You must dine as a wounded heroine. That is the worst of—" he turned to look for something on the table beside him—"accidents," he finished quietly.

"It was very careless of me. What are you looking for?"

"They have brought me no scissors. Never mind; I must bite the cotton off. Don't be afraid—I won't bite you."

She had shrunk as he bent his head, and she heard his strong white teeth cut through the

cotton. When he raised his head again she had gone from white to crimson.

As Roudy left the house he encountered his godfather on the doorstep.

"Just leaving, my boy?" Lord Roudenham said, with ponderous friendliness. "Sorry we are not dining at home to-night. Come in another evening soon. We are always pleased to see you." His tone somehow expressed "Poor fellow! It cannot matter how often such as *you* come to the house—you are set apart from your kind!"

"I wonder," Roudy mused on his homeward way, "why people should always take it for granted that because I am a cripple I must be a saint? It seems to me an added reason for being a sinner. Why should my physical infirmity indemnify me from the weaknesses of other men?"

He looked out of the window as the train bore him out of London. The evening was very fair, and the golden light beautified the endless line of roofs broken near and far by the spires of churches pointing unavailingly to Heaven. As they stopped in a station Roudy found himself staring at a line of advertisements placed in curious juxtaposition. Beecham's Pills and Pears' Soap flanked an announcement of the exhibition of a religious painting; it struck him as incongruous to read the name "Our Lord Jesus Christ" between the two. To advertise the Deity on the hoardings was a latter-day speculation that appealed to his cynicism; he wondered if it were a draw.

The streets thinned and gradually gave way to fields as he got nearer his destination—large meadows in which the hay was not yet cut, bordered by old trees whose shadows lay so lightly on the long grass that they seemed merely to float; pic-

icturesque villas, the red bricks softened by climbing roses; now and then a smooth tennis-lawn belonging to some club—the greener side of the suburbs upon which London has not yet laid the unmistakable mark of her annexation. Roudy lifted his face to the fresher air as he walked out of the station at the end of his journey, and leaned on his crutches a moment to get his breath, for the steps always tried him. A fellow passenger passed him, walking quickly. “Good night, Lipscombe,” he said. “What a lovely evening!”

“Lovely!” Roudy assented absently. He was wondering how Lady Roudenham would explain her—accident.

Duke Cotterell was dining at The Acacias that night. The conversation trickled in a thin stream of local interests and domestic details. Millicent announced the interesting fact that she could not read Kipling—“I don’t think his books do you any good,” she said; and Mrs. Lipscombe acquainted her family with the news that she had changed her laundress—the last woman was so careless with the shirts. Ella went to bed early. She told Roudy privately that if she did not Millie and Duke would want to sing “Friendship” standing hand in hand, and she had to play the accompaniment.

“I didn’t mind the first dozen times,” she said, “but it has begun to pall upon me. Mother always knits through it, and says, ‘I think you sing that better than you did last time, dears.’ Wilfred goes out—I’m sure I don’t blame him; and father is really the best off, for it sends him to sleep. Roudy, do you think love affairs are *always* like that?”

“No,” said Roudy briefly. A short time afterwards Ella heard the sound of his crutches going down the passage past her door, and knew that he also had escaped from the family party.

There was no light in the long low room under the roof; in hot weather the servants had orders to leave the gas unlighted. But the dusk of the summer night was but darkness made visible. Bogey scrambled out of the armchair, where he had converted himself into a fur hedgehog, and jumped on to the floor with a flop, pattering across the room to his master, who stooped for him and put him on his shoulder, from which the little beast crept along and laid himself flat under Roudy's chin. At night Bogey was apt to grow sentimental, and to require much petting and attention before he would settle down to sleep.

Roudy stood at the window; the casement was open to the East, and the sky was a thin shade of blue, a colour more suggested than discerned. Over the gate grew two acacia trees, just in the full foliage of the year. When the wind swept them gently, they rustled, and shook through all their young leaves, as a girl shakes her wealth of hair. There was a fair amount of traffic in the road outside—the road that was half hidden by the tremulous green boughs—and even at night vehicles were passing to and fro, and foot passengers also; more especially young men and maidens, for they were not liable to observation here. The voices floated up to the open window, however, as a couple strolled past. "But will you come?" Roudy heard the man say. "Oh, I don't know—p'r'aps—I'll see—there's no harm!" the girl replied. There was a dawning fear in her tone. Their footsteps died behind a jutting piece of masonry from a neighbouring house. Roudy's thoughts filled in the conversation. Then came a glimmer through the leaves, and the swift sound of wheels as two cycles flashed by, the whirring of the chain distinctly audible upon the night. A dog barked, and a man's

voice ordered it to be quiet; a cart rattled towards the bridge over the railway, and a streak of luminous smoke passed across the distance as the train went by. Then more cyclists, motors this time, riding into Eternity for all he could see of their road. He hardly noticed them, his thoughts were more with the lovers. The human interests of the voices, the fresher accents of the outside world, and the beauty of the darkened view before him set his pulses throbbing. It was the "rapture of the night" again. The memory of the afternoon flashed across his senses, and the universe narrowed itself to elementary emotions.

CHAPTER XI

"Oh, Love's but a dance,
 When Time plays the fiddle!
 See the couples advance—
 Oh! Love's but a dance!
 A whisper, a glance—
 'Shall we twirl down the middle?'
 Oh, Love's but a dance
 When Time plays the fiddle!"

—AUSTIN DOBSON

"I think I look rather nice!" Beatrice said as she stood back from the glass.

Every crisp hair on her head lay in perfect order, and there was an appearance of being well-groomed about her whole figure which brought a pleased curve to her lips. She looked a fresh, dainty little person in her evening gown, with its innumerable puffings and frillings to set off her bare neck and arms. The tennis club, to which both she and the Lipscombes belonged, gave three dances annually—one at the beginning of the season, one midway,

and one at the end. The latter was generally the best, but Beatrice anticipated a fair share of enjoyment at this, the mid-season dance, though the July weather was more conducive to sitting out than to waltzing.

"Now that little fan and my gloves," she went on, talking to herself. "It's so hot I must take a fan. Dear me, wherever did I leave those gloves?"

She went to the wardrobe and tossed over a heap of pretty things—laces and ribbons and trifles of all sorts, utterly unserviceable to a man's eyes, but which nevertheless have no small share in producing the feminine effect. As she picked up a lace handkerchief a little shrivelled thing fell out and lay at her feet. Beatrice bit her lip and coloured as her eyes lit on it. She remembered what it had once been—a spray of scented white hawthorn. All its green and white bravery was gone now, nothing left but a brown thing with sharp thorns that were still dangerous.

"What a fool I was!" she said impatiently, and her brows came together in a little frown, half of annoyance, half of pain.

It was two months since that little incident under the May-tree, and for the last six or seven weeks Beatrice had only met Roudenham Lipscombe twice. Without reason he had vanished out of her life, just in the same incomprehensible way in which he had entered it. Once she had bowed to him across the road on the way to the station, and once she had encountered him on his own doorstep just as she was leaving The Acacias.

"Are you going, Miss Reeve?" he had said as they shook hands. "I have not chanced on one of your visits for a long time. I seem to be very unlucky!" And he leaned on his crutches in his old fashion and looked at her. The queer attraction

about him asserted itself as strongly as ever for the minute, and for some days afterwards his voice haunted Beatrice—"Are you going, Miss Reeve? . . . I am very unlucky!" But she did not meet him again, and at last she asked Millicent about him. Beatrice was a daring young person; if she wanted anything she did her best to obtain it, regardless of caution.

"I never see your elder brother now, Millie," she said. "How is he?"

"Roudy? He is as well as usual, poor fellow! No, he doesn't get down as soon as he used. He has taken to cultivating his godfather, Lord Roudenham, and he often goes to their house in Piccadilly. We say that Lady Roudenham is the attraction!" And Millicent laughed, as at a good joke. It did seem a harmless witticism to the family to talk of Roudy in connection with any woman. Poor Roudy! Of course he was utterly outside the pale.

Beatrice looked up quickly. "Oh, yes, Lord Roudenham is married, isn't he?" she said carelessly. "What is Lady Roudenham like?"

"Tall and dark, rather an overwhelming, silent person. She is very graceful and very grave. I have seen her once or twice."

"Oh!" was all Beatrice said.

"Tall and dark and grave"—the words recurred to her to-night as she looked at her own image in the glass. Perhaps he admired large women. Beatrice was a small girl, and the very reverse of grave. Her face was always animated and bright and young.

She did not feel so young as she had done a month or so ago, however. Somehow the little deadly thorns of the hawthorn seemed to be stinging and pricking her secretly in spite of her determination to forget them. She had plenty of

partners at the dance, though she was comparatively new to the neighbourhood, and there was everything in favour of her enjoying herself. She was a girl who was invariably successful in a small way; men always asked to be introduced to her, and called her a nice, bright little girl. There was no fear of Beatrice being a wallflower, though her favourite partner did not seek her out at once as of old. Wilfred Lipscombe was one of the handsomest men present; he had gained a certain gravity of late, and evening dress suited him. Beatrice thought how well he looked, as he stood writing his name on the card of a girl near her. "But he looks older too," she thought critically and rather dispassionately.

Duke Cotterell came and spoke to her at once, but Wilfred did not hurry himself, until Beatrice's card was nearly full.

"May I have some dances?" he said at last, pausing at her side.

"I have only two left," she answered indifferently, thinking in her own mind that it did not matter to her, and he was rather silly—Millicent's word. Wilfred waltzed with her in silence too, which was slightly depressing—he did not want to talk, but he might have made some remark—and when it was over he asked her formally if she would come and have any refreshment. So they went and had supper instead of sitting on the stairs, and Beatrice ate her chicken and drank her cup somewhat huffily. Supper was generally the brightest and merriest time of the whole evening, but it dragged on this occasion, and she justly resented it as his fault. There was none of that pleasant lingering over the table while unfed couples regarded them in a wistful and hungry fashion from afar, for as soon as Beatrice had finished her supper she rose in demure

silence and preceded Wilfred out of the supper room. They had been so speedy that the next dance had not yet begun, and he offered her his arm, remarking that they might as well sit out somewhere.

"Oh, if you like!" she answered with suspicious meekness, but there was an angry little flush on her face.

Wilfred's "somewhere" evolved itself into the most secluded nook to be found. Beatrice raised her brows ever so slightly as he lifted the curtain for her to pass in, but she seated herself in one of the two chairs which had been thoughtfully placed in a dim light, with the same utter nonchalance, and unfurled her fan with a touch of insolence. She was glad that the heat had made her bring a fan—it is a woman's weapon.

"He speaks first!" she thought.

"Miss Pierce dances well," Wilfred remarked at last.

"Yes, and how pretty she looks to-night!" returned Beatrice, with cheerful cordiality.

"Do you think so? I am not fond of yellow," he said.

"Oh, are you not? I think it is so becoming. It is one of my favourite colours—I nearly wore it to-night."

"Really? There's an old adage that 'Yellow's forsworn,' isn't there?" he said, with a forced laugh.

"I believe so, but that would not affect me, as I owe no allegiance."

"Not even to your friends?"

"One can hardly forswear one's friends."

"One may mislead them."

"As how?" Beatrice queried, turning her bright eyes on him rather mockingly.

"It is so easy to make people think you like them when you really are rather averse to them than otherwise."

"If I were averse to anyone he could hardly be counted among my friends!" she retorted quickly.

"Well, your acquaintances, if you prefer it."

"So I am to owe an allegiance to the whole of my acquaintance, am I, however objectionable they may prove!"

"Oh, of course I do not mean that—only it seems to me rather hard on the poor wretches who get taken in."

"Really, Mr. Lipscombe, you are very abstract and analytical to-night. I am afraid I hardly follow you."

She picked up one of her long gloves which she had taken off at supper, and began drawing it on slowly. The action was a great help, and gave her a distinct advantage over Wilfred, who had nothing to do. His moment came, however, when she reached the buttons, and he reached out his hand with a brief "Allow me" that was very grand indeed. Beatrice submitted her wrist into his keeping, and sat in the same vexed silence while he buttoned her glove, drawing it away, however, the instant the last atom of pearl was into the button-hole.

"Shall I do the other for you?" he said.

"Thanks, I can manage that for myself."

Silence again, while Beatrice regained her advantage of occupation.

"You are very unkind," Wilfred said suddenly, his resentment breaking forth. "What possible harm could it do you if I buttoned your glove—and you know it would be a pleasure to me."

"I know nothing of the sort!" Beatrice returned, indignant in her turn.

"That is not the truth—I beg your pardon, but you do know that it would give me a great deal of pleasure."

"Pray do it then," she said icily, holding out the unfinished glove to him. It irritated her that he should look so undeniably handsome in the dim light, bending his smooth head over her hand; it irritated her still more when he raised his head and looked straight into her eyes with an expression between audacity, tenderness, and pleading.

"It seems to me that you are trying to quarrel with me, and it is rather ridiculous!" she said calmly.

"On the contrary, I am trying to make it up!"

"But we have not quarrelled!"

"Then your treatment of me is all the more unkind."

Beatrice laughed with some annoyance. "I do not see that you have any foundation for such a speech," she said, "so I suppose it is merely made to pass the time. But—excuse me, Mr. Lipscombe—I don't flirt."

"Neither do I," said Wilfred gravely—two more complete falsehoods they could hardly have told, either of them, but they really believed what they said at the moment—"and that is why ——"

"Our dance, Miss Reeve!"

A round-faced boy, with a high collar which evidently caused him much misgiving, had lifted the curtain, and was fidgeting and smiling inanely upon them. He was young enough to intrude without realising his enormity, even under Wilfred's haughty eyes, which took in every detail of his wretched, spluttering nervousness. Beatrice, like all her sex, rose to the occasion, smiled upon him,

and laid her hand on his arm, with a slight bow to Wilfred, who was left to indulge in fervent blasphemy as the curtain fell behind them.

When Beatrice reached home that night, or rather next morning, she went to the wardrobe and hunted about until she found the shrivelled piece of hawthorn, at which she stood looking thoughtfully for some minutes.

"I am glad that boy interrupted," she said to herself. "I don't know what I might have done. How handsome Wilfred is! But it was not that—when he bent his head over my hand he looked like *him*. I never saw the likeness before."

She went to bed and slept like a child, and the next day was hardly paler than usual for all her dissipation. Indeed, she was just as fresh and pretty as ever when she set out in the afternoon to pay a call, and there was no shadow on her bright face as she walked up the little garden path to Mon Désir. She was going to visit little Miss Vaughan again. It was a duty fraught with pleasant memories, and perhaps she decided on it to-day with a reason.

Miss Vaughan was so manifestly delighted and overcome at seeing her that Beatrice was sorry she had not been oftener. It was impossible not to be soothed and flattered by such innocent adoration, and Beatrice bloomed under it like a flower in the sunshine. She was at her best and brightest, and seemed to fill the dingy little room with radiance, like some rare and beautiful thing within the dull confines of a museum.

"I was at a dance last night, Miss Vaughan," she said as her delighted hostess poured out tea for her, and she straight began to talk about it, not because it had been so enjoyable—she seemed

to have lost the keen edge of her enjoyment of such things lately—but that she wished to amuse and interest the little old maid. Miss Vaughan's face flushed with excitement and attention; she hung upon Beatrice's words as though they were an engrossing romance.

"Your friends, the Miss Lipscombes, were present, I presume?" she said with eager timidity.

"Millicent was, but not Ella, of course—she is not out of the schoolroom yet. Millie looked so nice, she was wearing pale blue, and it suits her so well." She had already described her own dress minutely at Miss Vaughan's request.

"Oh, yes, I am sure it would do. And was—was Mr. Lipscombe there?"

Now Beatrice knew nothing of the laburnum tree and Wilfred, but she connected one Mr. Lipscombe, and one only, with Miss Vaughan. Her conclusion was strengthened by the slight hesitation with which the little lady suggested his presence on such an incongruous occasion, and her own face flushed a little as she answered.

"Oh, no—he could not be, of course, at a dance. I doubt if he ever goes out in the evening at all."

Miss Vaughan looked puzzled for a moment; then a light broke in on her.

"Oh, I did not mean the lame one, Mr. Roudenham," she said. "Poor fellow! No, of course he is quite out of such pleasures!" Beatrice winced slightly; even Miss Vaughan adopted an attitude of superiority and pity towards Roudy. "I meant Mr. Wilfred Lipscombe—the very handsome one. He was surely there!"

"Oh, yes, he was there," said Beatrice rather drily. "He is a great dancer, and very good-looking, as you say."

"I have seen him pass here very often on his way to the station," Miss Vaughan admitted. "I hope you will not think it very absurd, but I always think the beautiful youths of Greece must have resembled him. He is like the young Apollo as conceived by the great sculptors of old!"

The flush on her face had deepened with the effort of expressing her admiration; Beatrice looked at her in wonder, and she was almost inclined to laugh for a moment, and then some graceful sympathy made her flush in her turn.

"Yes, he is very handsome. It is rather a Greek type of face, I think," she said gently, Wilfred's severely perfect profile as he bent over her glove coming back upon her memory.

"Oh, I think his face is almost beautiful!" said Miss Vaughan with timid enthusiasm. "And his figure is so perfect too—strong, but light and active. He is quite an ideal man, is he not? I am sure as I have watched him walking down the road, treading so proudly, he might have been Hercules setting forth upon his labours!"

"Instead of a modern young man going up to town to a solicitor's office!" said Beatrice, laughing. She felt as if the world were being rather upset and revised, and began to realise that other people might think a great deal of Wilfred. Miss Vaughan was presenting him as he appeared in her own eyes, and magnifying his importance every minute, until Beatrice looked back on her cavalier treatment of him the night before with some dismay. How very cool and indifferent she had been over attentions which most other women would have valued! Miss Vaughan's admiration and idealism were so impersonal that they hardly counted as the mere liking of another girl would

have done, but they served to make Wilfred a much more impressive figure than he had been last night.

She drank another cup of lukewarm tea, and began to picture Wilfred as a hero. Miss Vaughan's laudation was very absurd, but there was a grain of truth in what she said—Wilfred was rather Grecian in type, and he walked very well. His firm, light step began to sound above the echo of a pair of crutches in Beatrice's ears, for she was a sensible little girl and took the goods the gods offered, though she might cast one longing glance at those that they withheld. It was no good making a fool of yourself over somebody who did not care about you, she thought practically—somebody who in fact manifestly preferred a type that was "tall, and dark, and very grave." She felt grateful to unconscious Miss Vaughan for having drawn her attention to advantages she might otherwise have passed by, and shook hands with her heartily at leaving.

"I shall come and see you again soon," she said. "I feel as if it did me good merely coming here!" And there was a ring of truth in her assertion.

"Oh, I shall be charmed, Miss Reeve! I really can't express to you how charmed!" Miss Vaughan answered earnestly. "It is really a great treat to me if you will come in at any time!" And she trotted after Beatrice to the door to let her out.

"How sweet your rose is!" Beatrice said, turning on the threshold, and pointing to a climbing rose that had made a fairly successful effort to bloom over the porch. Miss Vaughan did not answer, she was looking down the road beyond Beatrice with an absorbed expression that made

her guest turn round and follow her glance in surprise. Then Miss Vaughan's abstraction was explained, for on the further side of the road was Wilfred Lipscombe, swinging home from the station with his head thrown up, and his long stride covering the ground rapidly—an unconscious mark for Miss Vaughan's lingering gaze. A moment later he saw Beatrice and lifted his hat, and then he half hesitated, crossed the road, and came up the narrow little pathway, his novel figure seeming to dwarf the poor little surroundings still more.

- "Mr. Lipscombe—Miss Vaughan," Beatrice said, and Wilfred raised his hat again.

Little elderly Miss Vaughan stood tongue-tied between her hero and heroine; it was a great moment to her, a romantic incident which shed a halo on her ordinary suburban surroundings from that time forth. She glanced up at the manliness she so much admired with wistful eyes, and then they fell on Beatrice and almost filled with tears in their intense appreciation of her prettiness, and the appropriateness of the two to each other—representing, as they did to her, the beautiful young side of life in which she had had no part.

"Were you going home, Miss Reeve?" Wilfred said.

"Yes, I was just setting off. Are you very tired after last night?"

"Not at all. May I see you home?"

"But it is not your way——"

"I will make it my way, if you will allow me."

They had almost forgotten Miss Vaughan in their sudden consciousness of each other, for Wilfred must have recognised some new element in Beatrice which drew him across the road in spite

of what had passed the night before, and Beatrice looked up at "Hercules," and, notwithstanding her sense of humour, thought the simile had some appropriateness.

As they walked down the path together Beatrice remembered her hostess, and turned in some confusion to nod again as Wilfred held open the gate for her. Then he lifted his hat once more and closed the gate, and they vanished beyond the range of vision at Mon Désir.

They were walking westward, and the lengthening sunlight lay warm about them, glorifying them into a fleeting deification, so that their figures looked transfigured. For a moment they were silent, for the hour was theirs and the universe was with them, and then Wilfred said, with a deeper note in his voice, "Did you mean to be cruel last night, 'Trix?" And she answered, "No—not really."

"Then you will let me say what I was going to say if we hadn't been interrupted?" he said. Whether or no he had really intended to say anything then, the fates knew rather than he, but he meant it now.

Beatrice drew a long breath, and a last pang from the thorns and scent of the hawthorn went through her heart.

"You may say what you like to me," she said bravely.

"It would be a long time to wait, and perhaps it is not worth offering you," Wilfred began.

They walked on into the sunset.

Miss Vaughan stood at the door for a minute when they had left, looking after them with a pathetic hunger in her pallid face. She was so helpless, and fate had been so strong. There was

no future joy or sorrow left to her, and she knew it, but her instincts had outlived her possibilities.

"I hope that will be a match," she said to herself. "They are both so rich in all the good things of life, and it is so suitable. And what a charming girl she is! It was so good of her to come and see me in the first instance. I can't think what made her call upon me, I generally pass people's notice, particularly the young and happy. She must have heard that I was lonely and dull—perhaps Ella told her—and she came in her innate goodness of heart!"

She closed the front door and went into the little sitting-room. Even the reflection of the sunlight had faded. It looked more dingy and dull than ever.

"What a noble-shaped head he has!" thought Miss Vaughan. "And how beautifully he lifted his hat!"

CHAPTER XII

"When gracious music stirs and all is bright,
And beauty triumphs through a courtly night;
When I too joy, a man like other men:
Yet, am I like them then?"

—LIONEL JOHNSON

IN every life there comes a time when the original elements of nature rise up in overwhelming force and sweep away the barriers artificially constructed by education and training. Very disheartening is it to realise that all our self-control and governance becomes a feather in weight against a great passion, or a great desire, or a great anger. What we possess is of different

calibre to what we acquire, and for all our time and trouble can never be wholly eradicated.

Lena, Lady Roudenham, was learning this in the bitterness of sorrow. She was not quick to grasp facts, and apt to linger and test before she would accept any new development, however probable. She had also the confidence of an established self-repression which she took for control, and it seemed to her incredible that she could be swayed by any feeling stronger than her will. But it was gradually—very gradually, for she fought against every hint of proof—borne in on her mind that she loved a man who was not her husband, that her every thought was traitorous, and every heart-throb a wound to loyalty; she was being swept away by a passion which was so full of humiliation and pain that she writhed under it and loathed herself, and yet she knew that it was stronger than her contempt. Every tone of Roudy's voice was a familiar grief to her; she watched him covertly with yearning eyes, until she knew exactly the little movements of pain or uneasiness which his crippled limbs caused him, and the sound of his crutches on the floor caught her ear long before any footfall would do. He became a material proof of her bitter struggle to her, until she marvelled at love being said to hold any sweetness, for to her it was only pain.

She endured also the pang of seeing what she loved helpless and suffering, and, like his mother, she grew jealous of any slight to him that should seem to set him on a different level to his fellows, covering Nature's cruel defects with the cloak of her own affection, and resentful of other men's strength because he was so handicapped. The instinct of maternity, to succour and protect, was

awakened by his peculiar position; and made her long to do little services for him which she dared not allow herself.

Roudy's favourite seat at Piccadilly was the drawing-room window, from whence he could hear her sing and watch her as she played. When they talked Lena sat on a low couch by his side; it was a secret satisfaction to her that her seat was lower than his, and that he looked down on her as they chatted, for she would fain have forced him into superiority though but in the smallest trifles. On the same afternoon that Beatrice went to see Miss Vaughan Roudy was sitting in his window-seat overlooking the Green Park talking to Lena. The windows were open and the sun-blinds drawn, so that the room was rich with subdued golden light. It warmed Lena's dark hair and the white silken folds of her tea-gown as she leaned slightly forward on the couch to look at a song which Roudy held. She had been singing to him, and the refrain still seemed to linger in the air:

"Dreams are the gate of Paradise
Through which we catch a golden gleam;
For waking bliss will not suffice,
And happiness is but a dream."

"I should have liked a minor change there," said Roudy, pointing to a certain bar.

Lena was watching him covertly. Her eyes strayed from his broad shoulders to the crutch resting against his chair, and with a cautious movement she slid out her hand to touch it. It was strongly made, for Roudy was a heavy man, with a thick bar across the fork, and brass mountings under the worn velvet rest, and again at the foot above the leather pad. Lena rested her hand

in the fork, her fingers twining closely round the smooth oak; she was hardly listening to what he said in the flood of tenderness which came over her for the pathetic misfortune which the crutches recalled to her mind. Roudy laid the song on a table behind him, and then turned suddenly and looked at her. She drew her hand hastily from its resting-place, and the surprised colour came into her face at being caught. For a second she looked straight up at him, her eyes full and dark with the feeling she had not time to conceal, and then she drooped her lids and the blood ebbed away from her face, leaving her very white.

No one spoke. It seemed as if the universe stood still suddenly, while the live murmur of Piccadilly sounded like the waves of a far-off ocean beating up irresistibly. Roudy turned his face away, while Lena sat breathless, waiting for the earth to resume its ordinary motion again. Then, without looking at her, he held out his hand mutely, and felt her cool, soft fingers slide into it and cling to his. Along her wrist ran the scar of the wound he had dressed—it showed like a red line upon her white skin. He felt for it, running his fingers up and down it with a touch which made her shiver with terrified delight.

Lena looked down at the hand which held her own breathlessly; then she stooped her head as if impelled against her will, but there was no pride or reserve now in the curves of her yielding figure—lower she stooped and lower, until she laid her face on Roudy's hand and silenced her lips against it. The world had gone on again and was flowing in a rapid tide that bore her willingly with it, but the sound of life outside the windows was only a sympathetic accompaniment to the ecstasy and

passion of her own heart. She was conscious in the same instant that Roudy turned towards her and the fires of Hell or of Paradise gleamed before her eyes, and then that the drawing-room door had opened and the butler's subdued tones announced Madame Le Marchant.

Madame came in fanning herself with a large black fan. She was fearfully and wonderfully attired in old rose satin and black Spanish lace, and her hat was a size larger and fuller of feathers than ever. It was a wonder to the world how Madame contrived not to look ill-dressed in the costume she adopted.

"How stifling it is!" she said, as her hostess came forward to shake hands with her. "Bah! How the heat tires one!"

Lady Roudenham murmured a response. Madame's eyes rested on her in some surprise for an instant, and then widened in open admiration.

"Where are the men's eyes?" she exclaimed inwardly. "Why is not her portrait in all the shop windows, her picture on the walls of every exhibition, and her name in everyone's mouth as an unrivalled type? I never saw more transcendent beauty in my life! She glows like a red rose!"

There came another movement in the room, the scrape of a crutch on the floor, and a misshapen shadow rose upon Madame's vision behind Lena's lovely figure. She started and almost shuddered as those broad shoulders blotted out the light of the window.

"You, Roudy!" she said rapidly. "How strange that I always chance upon you like this!" She meant nothing but annoyance at the encounter, but Lena laid her hand upon the back of a chair

as if to steady herself, and drew up her head with humiliated defiance.

"My dear aunt, if you were as charmed at the meeting as I am you would not think to wonder!" Roudy said as they shook hands. His tones were quite silvery with sweetness, but Madame dropped his hand quickly.

"You will have some tea?" Lena suggested. Her voice was slightly hurried, and her breast rose and fell passionately as though she could hardly get her breath.

Roudy threw himself back in his chair with a half impatient sigh, and a vein in his forehead swelled out in a strong blue line, but he began to talk in the same suave tone as before, in spite of his aunt's persistent effort to ignore him and converse with Lady Roudenham.

"Lord Roudenham is still a victim of Parliament, I suppose?" she asked.

"Yes, he does not expect to get away until the session ends."

"Somewhat trying," remarked Madame with raised brows. "Are you going abroad?"

"To Italy, we thought, if it is not too hot. Lord Roudenham is a devotee of Italy. He never tires of the scenery."

"Ah! Well, I thought it overrated when I stayed in Venice last—all tourists and mosquitos. Even the gondolas are being ousted by the steamers. Venetian steamers! It sounds like a new American drink. But anyhow you will be thankful to leave town."

Lady Roudenham did not reply. She was handing a teacup to her guest at the moment, and Madame was looking straight at her. The elder woman's gaze dwelt on her face very kindly, at

first with nothing but cordial admiration, but as she looked a curious expression came into her keen eyes. She remained looking at Lena for a moment, and then she chanced to turn her head and look at her nephew. He was still sitting in his hunched-up, lounging attitude, and his eyes were fixed upon Lady Roudenham. It seemed to Madame that for the first time she saw his face—as if hitherto she had merely beheld a mask; but what appalled her most was a dreadful likeness to her brother—a hideous likeness that seemed to show her Gabriel's face darkened and marred. Her voice dropped into silence, and she answered Lady Roudenham's next speech mechanically.

"Yes, I think it is so," she said—Lena had asked her if she would have some more cake—and a few minutes after she took her leave, firmly refusing Roudy's offer to see her into her cab.

As she left the room she encountered Lord Roudenham on the landing, and stopped to shake hands.

"This is indeed a pleasant surprise," he said, with a formal courtesy that was quite genuine. "You have seen Lady Roudenham?"

"Yes. She looks as though the heat tried her, and I am sure I don't wonder," said Madame briefly. "It is a pity you can't get away sooner."

"I hope she has not a headache," he said with slight anxiety. "She has suffered so much with headache lately."

Madame's lips were compressed into a thin line. "Has she?" she said. "I do not know if she has a headache, but it might be advisable to ask."

"I will come down and let you out," Lord Roudenham volunteered in a less ceremonious manner than he used to most people. Madame

had forced her individuality even upon his comprehension years ago, and he never lost a half-reluctant interest with which she inspired him.

"No," she said abruptly, stopping short, and waving him away as coolly as though he were a mere boy to be bidden here and there, "go and look after your wife."

He laughed a little, but obeyed her with a slight bow, and went back to the drawing-room thinking of her quick imperious gesture, and how well he had known it of old. The memory brought a more animated look than usual to his torpid face.

As he entered the room his godson rose from his chair and took up his crutches. "It is greeting and farewell together," he said. "I also must be going."

"You cannot stay and dine? We have no engagement, have we, Lena?"

"I cannot stay, thanks," Roudy answered, without waiting for her to speak. He shook hands with Lord Roudenham, and then held out his hand to Lena. The two palms clung together closely for a moment, and as though thrilled with an electric current she glowed into that sudden rich beauty again which had caught Madame's attention.

Roudy was not looking at her, but his eyes went beyond her to a long pier glass wherein he saw their two figures sharply represented in pitiless contrast. They might have been chosen as opposite types—the woman's long gleaming figure in its white gown, with that radiant look, so joyous in its abandonment of the old struggle—and the man's big, ungainly, and dark, with a face which mocked suffering as too familiar to be terrible.

Roudy dropped her hand gently and went away, his crutches echoing through the room with each

sharp click on the polished floor. He closed the door behind him as though to prevent their coming with him, and went out of the house with a lagging tread which Ella knew and called Roudy's tired step.

Afterwards he could not remember his homeward journey much. The green of the Parks glared at him, and the faces in the streets made his eyes ache, but everything—even the lines of houses and the gradual green fields were blotted out from his brain, which held only a long looking-glass and the contrast of two figures.

He did not go home. He walked on into the quiet suburban roads beyond and found himself in an evening-tinted field where the daylight colours were all becoming merged into one uniform twilight. He had entered it without much object, but he sat down on the roots of a big tree and began to think. From where he sat the country fell away into green distance, only patched here and there with the inevitable villas which London was throwing out as if to feel her way. On the horizon was the line of the Surrey hills, the guardians of their county. Roudy's eyes clove to them hungrily, and his thoughts went out over the intervening valley-land to cool themselves on those wind-swept slopes. In the presence of the hills human interests have a way of sinking into insignificant details. Roudy sat still on his tree-trunk with his crutches beside him, forgetful of the falling night and the gems of dew beginning to glimmer on the grass stalks. The stars came out slowly, shining steadily in the arch of the summer heavens, which as the night deepened were only colourless dusk, neither blue nor black. They found him still there with a

face turned hillwards, and thoughtful with a wisdom that was grief.

Roudy was wondering over his own life. • It lacked the object of a great good or a great sin; it was aimless, and for once a passion of feeling that was not rage, nor desire, nor recklessness, but partook of all of these, rose up within him to urge him to act at last. He had always stood by in weary cynicism, too deeply cognisant of the "Cui bono?" of existence to do more than laugh when he saw humanity in earnest. Sometimes at sight of men buying and selling, marrying and giving in marriage, he wondered whether these things were worth while for the mere joy of action. There was much that he might have done, and from which he had held his hand, not from any better motive, but because of the ceaseless voice that said in him, "To what purpose?" He had seldom been tempted to take an absolute, irretrievable step that should force him out of the groove into which he had fallen by his own intention; he was mischievous, but deliberate wrong did not attract him because he foresaw too plainly that the consequences would be unpleasant. The game was never worth the candle, he said. For ten minutes a whole life had hung in the balance that afternoon; then a chance thing had turned the scale—the reflection in a looking-glass. She was like this—he was like that. Nothing would alter it, though in her eyes it might look different. To what good? He held his hand; yet the wrack of the storm still swayed him, and made him linger a little over his own uncertainty, as though he had absolutely done the thing of which he had only thought. •

He looked out to the line of the hills, and panted
 "—the tracks the water. And when the

moon rose—a bright silver-gilt disc—that shadowy figure was still crouching on the tree's roots, with broad bent shoulders leaning sideways and face turned to the hills.

* * * * *

A wind had risen when Madame Le Marchant got into her taxi at Piccadilly, and blew freely in her face as she was driven to Victoria. She was very warm, and the cool wind would have alarmed her on any other occasion, for she was nervous of taking a chill. But now she did not notice it, or even draw up the glass of the windows. There was trouble in her clever face and disturbance in her brilliant eyes. She had an especial allowance of that propensity to jump at conclusions peculiar to women, and she possessed a quickness of mental vision which almost amounted to a sixth sense. Also she liked Lena Serle and she feared her nephew. She had less than a detail to build upon, but by the time she had reached her flat she had flashed her thoughts over a possible and disastrous sequence of events that made her giddy.

"What is one to do?" she asked herself fiercely, walking up and down her drawing-room with a tread like an impatient man. "It is equally impossible for me to warn that fool Roudenham as to argue with Roudy. The one would break my warnings upon the blank wall of his hopeless incredulity and stupid views of honour, and the other is as clever as Satan, and as unprincipled. As to the woman herself, she is better left in ignorance, if, as Heaven grant! she is still unconscious. That it should be Roudy!—and I wondered who inherited that essential quality of Gabriel's—Ah! That it should be Roudy! I never thought of him. He has seemed an imp, an in-

human creature to me—it seems he is only too human. That it 'should be Roudy!"

She quivered with her own excitement and the evening chill. The parrot in his cage winked a dull eye at her, and spoke after the manner of his kind like a ventriloquist, so that his voice sounded an uncanny thing without bodily presence. "Kiss me for good-bye!" he said in a hoarse whisper which made Madame start. "Pretty Poll! Come again soon—who are you?—Let us pray—let us pray—let us pray!" His eye closed and his voice dropped sleepily.

Madame sat down limply in a chair. She felt ill and aged, and her thoughts raced each other back to a day long years ago when she had seen her brother look with just such eyes at a woman—and the consequences. Only Gabriel's passions had some sort of a bound set to them. Madame thought of the drawing-room at Piccadilly, and shuddered.

"I wonder whether it will come soon?" she speculated, her fiery imagination running riot through the future. "It must happen sometime. There will come a day when he will know—and then God help her! She is a good woman, and strong, but he is bad, and stronger. He will have no mercy, no, not though she prayed for it! I suppose she will go away with him—and I cannot prevent it. I could not prevent Gabriel, but I helped the girl afterwards. I will help Lena if she will let me, poor child! She will need it—Gabriel would have had some pity on a woman. Roudy will have none."

* * * * *

It was a fresh night. The stars and the dew kept their vigil with that lonely figure on the tree-trunk.

CHAPTER XIII

"One that was a Woman, sir—but, rest her soul! she's dead."

—SHAKESPEARE

"When Love is once dead
Who shall awake him?
Bitter our bread
When Love is once dead.
His comforts are fled,
His favours forsake him.
When Love is once dead
Who shall awake him?"

—ARTHUR SYMONS

"Do you think you shall want me this afternoon, Roudy?"

"Do I ever want you?"

"Always!" was Ella's prompt reply, answering his somewhat humorous smile rather than his apparently ungracious words. "Where would you have been during this past seven days but for me? Haven't I attended on the Bogey, and routed Millie and Mother when they wanted to choke you with beef-tea and jelly? Oh, Roudy, and it was such a lark! I forgot to tell you—they have been sending up chicken and things I knew you didn't want, so I just gave it all to the Bogey! He had a royal time (you know how he loves poultry), and Mother said that as I was the only person who could persuade you to take proper nourishment, I was to be let alone to do it, and no one was to interfere. So you got a little peace."

Roudy laughed softly from the couch on which he was propped up on many pillows. It was diffi-

cult to get enough cushions to give him any ease, and his face was still lined with the pain of the past seven days. Roudy had had a bad week, one of the worst his family ever remembered. "Owing to reckless exposure," said the indignant doctor, whose information was that Roudy had gone for a stroll after business one very hot day, and had fallen asleep in a field. The night had turned cold, after the treacherous manner of the English summer, and Roudy had suffered. He had come home at four o'clock in the morning, numb and stiff, and had gone to bed, from which he had not risen for days. Ella established herself as sick nurse—as far as Roudy would bear to be nursed—and had stuck to her post with the grim tenacity of a bulldog. It was through her that the family learned the accepted version of Roudy's night vigil, but even to Ella the secret of that fatal exposure was unknown, and her quickness of love failed to warn her of any possible danger that might accrue. Roudy acknowledged nothing more than one of his usual attacks, and when he said he was better his family were as helpless to contradict or combat him as they had been all his life. But the end of that experience in the quiet fields was not yet.

"How did you stave off Millie and her drugs?" he asked, looking amusedly across the room at Ella, who was sitting near the west window on a low stool, her chin in her hand, and Bogey's pointed nose peeping out under her arm.

"I had to make an accomplice of Duke," she replied with some regret. "Millie was so troublesome I couldn't manage her alone."

"Oh, you did, did you!" said Roudy drily. "Well?"

"Oh, he was really very good. He told Millie

to let me alone, and he took her out of the way. He isn't half bad," added Ella condescendingly, and quite innocent of the fact that Duke had been a ready accomplice for the sake of her confidences, though possibly he was unconscious of this himself. Roudy, who was never innocent, laughed silently.

"Is it very married downstairs?" he asked lazily.

"Very. I think it stimulates each couple to see the other going on—you know! I rushed out of the conservatory last night because Millie and Duke were there, and I nearly fell over 'Trix and Wilfred in the morning-room. Finally, I sat on the stairs, I was so sick of hearing a scramble and seeing people look like helpless idiots whenever I opened a door. 'Trix wants to know how you are, Roudy."

"I will send her word when I know myself. It is a question always offered to invalids as a counter irritant, and has generally appeared to me to warrant assassination."

"Oh, I don't think she meant me to ask you exactly. She came and asked me privately. She liked you, you know, Roudy," added Ella calmly.

"I do know. But why the past tense? Doesn't she like me now?"

"I think," said Ella slowly, "that she is afraid of you."

"I think she is afraid of herself. Most women are. Why did you want to know if you were to be in attendance this afternoon?"

"Because I had a letter from Aunt Feodore this morning, and she says she is very poorly—sick is what she actually said, I think, she uses such queer words. I wasn't to tell anyone; it is only a chill, but I thought I would go over and see."

"Very well. You are taking up a new rôle though, are you not?"

Ella flushed. "I don't think I should ever be a good nurse," she said quickly. "I am too forgetful and impatient."

"Are you? Well, you know best. But what has become of the other vocation? Is it abandoned?"

"I haven't abandoned it," said Ella quietly. "I am thinking."

"I am thinking, too," said Roudy. "I am like you—I want my own life. I saw a house the other day where I should like to live, Ella."

"By yourself, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Roudy!" Then she checked the dismay in her voice. "Where is it?" she said.

"Facing the high road, down at Thurston, about a mile from here. It is that tall brick house that stands back behind the poplar trees. I see it is still to let."

"And no wonder! It always looks to me all on one side. I believe it is tumbling down. It is positively crooked!"

"It would last my time," said Roudy. A shadow as of both physical and mental pain crossed his face. He was suddenly conscious of his likeness to a wounded animal which seeks out a place in which to die. The parallel was so distinct and startling to his own sharpened mind that he glanced at Ella to see if she had caught the suggestion. He had not intended that—as yet, at any rate. But Ella was thinking of the tangible image his words suggested—the old house at Thurston—and she missed the more subtle meaning which underlaid them.

"It would fall down in the night, and crush you," she said, laughing. "And I should come with a spade next day and dig about, and discover Bogey as a fossil! Eh, Bogey-Kat?"

"Well, I do not see much chance of buying or even renting it for myself," said Roudy, and his voice dragged a little, as if weary. "So you may make your mind easy."

Ella still looked dubious at the bare idea of Roudy wishing to live in such a place. The house in question was an old structure of red brick, which had been added to in a way which made it look one-sided. The line of roof was certainly not straight either, and altogether it had a very doubtful appearance. The opinion of the neighbourhood was that it was only fit to be sold for building purposes and pulled down, but an old caretaker lived there, and had done so for some years, while a dingy board announced that this desirable residence was to be let or sold. Why it had attracted Roudy was a question only to be answered in his own devious mind, but he had coveted it for some time, and even gone through the dusty, deserted rooms and interviewed the caretaker, who was silent and respectable—two commendable qualities. Since he had been laid up it had haunted his mind with a persistence no doubt partly due to illness, but it had come to wear the aspect of a haven of refuge to him, at which he looked with distressed longing as at something unattainable. Roudy's world was sometimes almost unbearable to him, though all unknown to those who peopled it.

Ella found Madame Le Marchant laid up with her "chill," and even to the girl's inexperienced eyes looking very ill. She seemed to have aged marvellously all of a sudden, and confessed to feel-

ing very weak, but her indomitable spirits helped her to speak cheerfully nevertheless.

"The doctor says I had a touch of influenza," she said. "But there is no fear of infection, for the fever is all gone, otherwise I would not have sent for you. It is only this terrible lassitude and weakness that make me feel as if I should never get about again." She lay and looked at Ella with a curious wistfulness. "I was always very fond of you, Ella," she said suddenly. "How are all your people?"

"Very well—at least most of us. I am sorry no one has been over this week," said Ella remorsefully, "but we had no idea you weren't all right, and Millie has been out with Mr. Cotterell a great deal, and Roudy has been laid up, so I couldn't leave."

"Roudy! . . . Oh, what has he been doing?"

"He stayed out all one night in a damp field, and of course it made him ill," Ella explained.

"Whatever for?"

"I don't know. It does sound mad, doesn't it, but Roudy does queer things sometimes. He says he was 'sorting his inclinations.' I don't know what he means, but I expect he fell asleep."

"What day was it?" asked Madame.

"Thursday, last week."

"Ah!"

She lay still, thinking, for some time. "So you were sick nurse?" she said at last. "How was that?"

"Because I couldn't bear anyone else to interfere with him. Roudy is mine, you know."

"You are very fond of him!" said Madame with surprised incredulity.

"Everyone is very fond of Roudy whom he

allows to be so. As a rule he won't, though. Shall I alter your pillows, Aunt Fee? They look so uncomfortable."

"No, let them alone, Chérie. I want to think. Sit there at the end of the bed, where I can see your face, and tell me about this brother of yours. Is he better?"

"Yes, but he suffered terribly. I used to see the veins stand out on his temples like cords—poor Roudy!"

"He is not getting about yet?"

"He has not, but he is coming down again soon. I think the Roudenhamms wrote and asked him to go there as soon as he was better, but he would not promise."

"He refused?"

"Yes, I expect it amounts to that—he either wrote or is going to. He said he did not expect to see them again—before they left London, I suppose."

Madame's eyes dwelt searchingly on Ella's small face. After a while, she said rather abruptly, "There must be some good in Roudy!" and Ella flushed indignantly.

"I don't know if he's good," she said. "He's dear. I rather hate good people, so perhaps Roudy isn't. I like him just as he is, though."

"What a champion!" said Madame with a faint smile. "I did not mean to decry him, child, I was following a train of thought." Then with one of her unexpected flashes of tenderness she said, "Poor boy! What a terrible maimed life!"

"He told me to-day that he wanted to get away, only of course he can't afford to live anywhere but at home," Ella said thoughtfully. "There is a terrible tumble-down old house which he loves, and

he wants to go and live there, he says, and have his life to himself. My poor old Roudy! How I *should* miss him!"

"Yes, men want their separate lives," Madame assented. "And he wants to get away—he ought to get away. Can't your father afford it?"

"I don't suppose Roudy ever suggested such a thing to him—it was only a daydream," Ella said. "And you see now that Will and Millie are both engaged they seem the most likely people to leave home."

"That's so," Madame agreed, but she still looked thoughtful. "Tell me about Will's fiancée. You like her?"

"She is very bright and pretty and nice—oh, yes, I like her. She is Millie's friend, you know."

Madame smiled in an ambiguous fashion, and asked a few more questions. Just as Ella was leaving, however, she went back to her former theme.

"I think Roudy ought to get away," she said. "He ought to have larger interests—occupations—anything. It is ridiculous to look upon him as different to other men because he is a cripple. He wants his own life, as he says."

"I think it's 'want, and can't have' with all of us," said Ella rather recklessly as she went away.

Madame turned over in bed with an effort. She was even weaker than she owned, and it startled her a little, for all her courage.

"If I mean to alter that will I feel inclined to do it soon," she said, after a moment's deliberation. And then she added as before, "There must be some good in Roudy that I never saw. Yet I saw it in Gabriel. I wish I could go back and know him differently, but I fear I never shall."

She lingered in bed for another week, growing

no stronger, though there did not appear any cause for anxiety to the Solicitor's family, who came to see her day by day. But one evening Gabriel Lipscombe was telegraphed for, and before morning Feodore Le Marchant was dead. She died quite peacefully, a quiet dropping out of existence in an exhausted sleep—a strange contrast to her restless, energetic life. It was such an unexpected ending to her illness that the family felt stunned. Ella had seen her only that afternoon and had thought her no worse; Millie had been over the day before and had reported her better. Mr. Lipscombe looked aged and grey when he brought the news, it was almost as great a shock to him as to them, though she had told him as soon as he arrived that the doctor said she was sinking. She was conscious until she fell into that last sleep, and quite clear-headed, informing him of a certain codicil to her will which altered the bestowal of what she had to leave.

"I have not divided it, Gabriel," she said, with a gleam of her old self-assertion. "There was too little to be of any use to anyone divided. But there is between two and three hundred a year, and a certain sum uninvested on account. It all goes to Roudy—he is the one of your children who is unable to provide for himself as the others might—and there must be some good in Roudy. Perhaps he will not want it for long—I have a strange feeling that he and I may meet again soon and get to know each other better—but he can pass it on to Ella—I think he will do that, for the child loves him." She spoke with pauses between the sentences, and her voice was little above a whisper. "Gabriel, I think he is the one of them who is most like you—but I did not know it until lately. Do you remember that girl?"

He did not answer, but a new line seemed suddenly drawn across his forehead.

"I could not help thinking of her to-night—I do not know why. Gabriel, you were less merciful than your son—but I think he is the more passionate of the two. I have never forgotten a look I once saw on his face."

She hardly spoke again, and the Solicitor had answered barely a word, save that he said, "You are right," when she told him of the codicil. After her death it was found with her other papers, correctly witnessed, and drawn by her own lawyer (she preferred to have her affairs managed outside the family, she said, and had never allowed her brother to undertake them for her), and dated a few days before her death. By it, Roudenham Lipscombe was residuary legatee, after a legacy of one hundred pounds had been placed in trust for Ella until her coming of age. Roudy would have, as she said, between two and three hundred a year and all the furniture in the flat; and as Madame had been loath to part with anything when she left Paris, and had crammed her rooms full in preference, there was quite sufficient to furnish a bachelor establishment.

Of course the family were strongly against his buying the old house for which he had such a fancy. Millicent was to be married in the winter and begin housekeeping in a modest fashion, rather than wait until Duke had made a chimerical fortune; Wilfred and Beatrice had firmly announced their intention of waiting some years, but their respective relations felt dubious (as a matter of fact they were married the following year, when Wilfred was taken into partnership in the firm); and, if Roudy left, The Acacias would be empty except for

his father and mother and Ella. Equally, of course, the family wasted their breath.* When Roudy came to look into the matter, he found that it would be to his final advantage to buy outright, rather than lease, and buy he did, but the eager owner found to his disappointment that he had not overreached his purchaser as he fondly hoped to do. The deeds were signed, and the house passed into its new possessor's hands within a short time after the settlement of Madame Le Marchant's affairs, and then Roudy set about having it done up and furnished at his leisure. It went by the mock title of "Roudy's Refuge" in the family, until Ella christened it so satisfactorily that the name stuck for all time. She called it Crooked House.

It was some time before Roudy recovered sufficiently from his escapade of the night to get about as usual. He was upstairs for another week after Madame's death, and seemed in no hurry to get over his convalescence, but no one thought anything of his unusual submission to physical weakness. It was just one of Roudy's freaks; the dominant will in the hampered body had made itself felt long since, and dispensed with comment or interference of the most passive sort. Roudy remained confined to his room as long as he thought fit, and Ella was in a way thankful, for it gave her an excuse for spending most of her time with him and Bogey, and escaping the engaged couples, who, she explained to Roudy, grew less bearable every day.

"They have lost all their shyness now," she said. "They sit hand in hand all over the place, and the other day Duke and Millie asked me to come into the morning-room and talk to them if I liked! *If I liked!* I did go in once out of polite-

ness, and sat nearly with my back to them, and what do you think they said?"

"That you had better turn round, I expect."

"Yes, that's just it! They began by saying, 'Let us show Ella how it is done,' and then when I took no notice of them they said, 'But you aren't looking at us!' as though they were quite disappointed. Oh, they are all mad!"

"They seem to think you very inexperienced."

"Well, I am in that way, thank goodness! I wouldn't flirt, if flirtation really means those nasty, vulgar ways. But I call that spooning!"

"And did you never——"

"Roudy!"

"—see Wilfred and Miss Reeve going on in the same way?"

"Oh, I see—I beg your pardon. No, not so bad. Wilfred sings silly sentimental songs—always the same songs too, which I have to play for him, and gets a new nickname for Beatrice every day. I think it was 'Pony' yesterday, and 'Chum' the day before, and I heard him call her Queen Bee this morning. But, on the whole, they don't get in my way as much as the others. Beatrice still has the grace to get red if you come on them suddenly, too."

"I think I will come downstairs again to-day," said Roudy thoughtfully. He did not add that he was making a grave physical effort for the sake of a mental distraction.

Beatrice had been staying at The Acacias for some days. At first a sense of nervousness possessed her, the reason of which she declined to acknowledge even to herself. But as the days went by, and Mrs. Lipscombe openly lamented that poor

Roudy would be laid up for weeks in all probability, she was lulled into a false security.

She was coming downstairs about tea-time that afternoon without dreaming of an encounter, when just as she reached the last few steps she stopped short, for there was Roudy standing straight in front of her at the foot of the flight. She would have preferred meeting him in the presence of the family, but, retreat being impossible, she stood still on the third stair from the bottom and looked cheerfully unconscious.

"I am glad to see you down again," she said. "Are you better?"

"Obviously," he replied coolly. "Won't you come a little further down? I can't reach you there, and I want to shake hands."

Beatrice came down another step and held out her hand.

"I haven't seen you to congratulate you yet," he said as he took it.

"Thank you!" said Beatrice hastily, wishing it were over.

"Oh, wait a bit. I didn't say I did congratulate you."

"Really!" she expostulated, laughing rather constrainedly, and wishing he would let go of her hand. "If you are not going to, I think I will make my way to the drawing-room. I am sure tea is ready."

"Well, I don't know," said Roudy deliberately, as though he were firmly set on considering the subject without hurry. "Of course Wilfred's advantages are obvious." A little flash came into her eyes as she recognised the literal truth of the statement. Wilfred's advantages were the obvious ones. "But have you taken into considera-

tion," continued her tormentor, "that you will have to accept me as a brother?"

"Are you so terrible?" said Beatrice, lightly. "I must ask Millie."

"I am afraid there is no getting out of it either," he went on. "You will have to call me Roudy, though you will probably spend the next few weeks in trying to catch my eye when you speak to me, and so avoid a name altogether."

"On the contrary, I shall be very pleased to use your Christian name," said Beatrice with extreme innocence. But her heart sank.

"And I am afraid you must let me call you, Beatrice—but that," he added gently, "will be no effort. The other privileges incident to the position will develop themselves."

"Suppose we leave the future to take care of itself entirely and go into the drawing-room?" she said, slipping her hand out of his.

"You are willing to risk the relationship, then?"

She would have given much at that moment to say something annihilating about his utter insignificance beside Wilfred, but as she stood there he stretched out his hand and touched her dress in a half-appealing fashion.

"Is it such an unbearable prospect, Beatrice?" he said.

She brushed past him hastily and ran into the drawing-room.

"Your brother is coming down to tea," she said to Millicent, carelessly. "I passed him on the stairs."

She was more attentive and demonstrative than usual to Wilfred that night.

CHAPTER XIV

"But who could have expected this?
 When we two drew together first
 Just for the obvious human bliss,
 To satisfy life's daily thirst
 With a thing men seldom miss?"
 ("By the Fireside.")

"Just when I seemed about to learn!
 Where is the thread now? Off again.
 The old trick! Only I discern—
 Infinite passion, and the pain
 Of finite hearts that yearn."
 ("Two in the Campagna")
 —ROBERT BROWNING

. **T**HE long window was open,
 and the exhausted air
 floated the curtains gently. Lady Roudenhams
 stood there idly, with one foot resting on the sill,
 as though she had half intended stepping on to
 the narrow balcony outside, and then had repented
 and paused in the act, her eyes on the dusty trees
 of the Green Park opposite, and the shadow of the
 balcony awning over her face. The vapid sunlight
 lay in faint patches on the uneven ground of the
 Park, which rose and fell in sweeps of grass still
 fairly green—hesitating sun and shade which
 melted into each other, devoid of the sharp dis-
 tinctions to be seen earlier in the year. May in
 London draws emphatic edges to her sunlight and
 shade, June softens them somewhat, July melts
 them into each other, and August gives nothing
 but a uniform glare, neither one thing nor the other,

unless in these two later months an errant east wind of the forgotten spring comes to blow the colour back into the earth and sky.

Lady Roudenham's gaze appeared nothing but calm contemplation of the prospect; only a little restless movement of her hand which fretted with the blind cord betrayed any pulsation of life within her, but her thoughts were very much engrossed with alien matters—so much so that she did not hear Lord Roudenham enter the room, nor cross it with his dull tread, and started when he laid his hand on her shoulder. He was one of those people who walk almost flatfooted, and his movements had no elasticity in them.

"Not gone to dress, Lena! Why, it is nearly seven o'clock, and we dine with the Ponsonbys to-night," he said.

"What a nuisance!" she replied, almost irritably, her quiet voice softening the impatience of her words. "I had forgotten. I will go."

She turned rather listlessly to cross the room, and her eyes, resting for a moment vacantly upon a lounging chair by the further window, gradually darkened and widened into a flash of expression. The chair and the piano had grown to mean things to her; they were no longer mere pieces of furniture, they were silent monuments of memory.

"I should have been up before," Lord Roudenham said, "but Lipscombe has been here, and has kept me downstairs."

Lena laid her hand on a chairback quickly and turned round. "Mr. Lipscombe himself?" she said, her voice toned to conceal her incredulity.

"Yes, he came round with some documents to be explained. I really don't know what I should do without Lipscombe, points of law are one too,

many for me alone." He smiled in placid acknowledgment of his own modesty. •

"Why did he not send one of his sons?"

"Wilfred is just engaged, he tells me, and was going to see his lady-love this afternoon." There was an indulgent amusement on Lord Roudenham's face. "It seems to be a rather satisfactory affair altogether."

"Oh—yes?"

"And Roudenham is knocked up—has been laid on the shelf for some days."

"I think I will go and dress," Lena said; her fingers were fumbling with some quaint silver ornaments on a little table—Dutch toys, models of tiny cabinets and ships and stools—she moved them as a blind person might. As she reached the door she turned carelessly. "I suppose it is only one of his usual attacks?" she said. "He seemed pretty well on Thursday when he was here."

"It seems to have been an unusually severe one," Lord Roudenham replied. "The doctor said——"

"The doctor! They sent for a doctor—yes?"

"That he had run some foolish risk, been out half the night—I believe the very night after he had been here—and taken a chill, I suppose. I am surprised. I thought him too sensible to be so reckless."

Lena was not surprised. She had learned that the most sensible people were capable of going mad for a time; it seemed to her that she could be madder than all the irresponsible people she ever met. The greater the height, the greater the fall. But her heart contracted with reproach and yearning—he was ill, and she had not even known. What was more, she could scarcely have done anything if she had known. A fierce jealousy of the hands

which tended him, and the rights of those about him, rose in her.

"I am sorry," she said, gravely, her passionless voice still under control. "I suppose there is nothing we can do?"

"I do not think so," Lord Roudenham said, in his slow, considerate fashion. "You cannot think of anything, can you? I might write to the gardeners at the Towers to send him some fruit."

"I did not mean that—we will do that, of course," she said, rather more hastily. "Could we not have him here—I mean, to look after him? It is a trouble to them to nurse him, perhaps." In spite of herself her feverish desire got into her words and stirred her subdued voice.

A vague surprise dawned in Lord Roudenham's face. "I think his own family are the proper people to nurse him," he said with unintentional stiffness.

"Oh, of course, if you are thinking of the etiquette of the thing!" she said with most unusual bitterness. "I was merely trying to do them a kindness." The lie passed her lips with an ease which frightened her when she remembered it afterwards.

"My dear Lena, I quite understand and appreciate your thought," he said, with imperturbable satisfaction. "But it would be hardly appropriate to make such an offer. When he is better——"

Lady Roudenham turned swiftly and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her with a sharp click. The discourtesy was so unprecedented from her that Lord Roudenham's astonishment quite woke his face out of its lethargy for a moment.

Lena did not refer to the subject again. She dressed, and dined, and talked through the evening

like an automaton of which the machinery was too perfect to be detected. Her soul was with Roudy, watching the lines of pain growing on his forehead, stretching out faint hands to smooth his pillow, and standing by helplessly, while others who had the right took her coveted place. She saw the long room of which he had told her, where the sunlight always came, and watched Ella sitting on the low stool by his side where he said she often sat. But even Ella's hands were not tender enough, they lacked the intuition of a love that knew exactly how to help him—if it only dared!

The days which followed were drawn-out stretches of hours, painted with eternal pictures of Roudy suffering—Roudy so ill that they called in a doctor!—Roudy wanting some least thing which she might have done, and which somebody had forgotten. Women torture themselves with far greater genius than any punishment designed in Hell. Once she wrote—it was the letter Ella had mentioned to Madame Le Marchant—saying how sorry they were to hear of his illness, and hoping to see him as soon as he was better. It was such a pale shadow of what she felt that she laughed in dreary mockery to read it through. The thin, conventional phrases came back to her for days like accusations. In her misery she even doubted his quickness to read between the lines.

She had not yet received any answer when one morning Lord Roudenham came to her hastily with the morning paper in his hand and a disturbed expression lightening his face.

"Those poor Lipscombes!" he said. "It seems endless trouble for them."

Lena did not speak. She had been singing—the last notes of her song had hardly died away before

he entered, and the echoes still seemed to be whispering :

“ And death has blotted out
The rapture of the night ! ”

Her hands still rested on the keys, she sat with dead nerves, waiting, and holding her breath for the terrible stab of pain which must follow this strange numbness.

“ You might drive down and leave cards,” he went on, without waiting for her to speak. “ Of course, you could not go in ; a death in the family makes visitors an intrusion.”

“ It is death, then ? ” she whispered, trying to moisten her lips and prevent the restless impulse to spring up and pace to and fro to relieve the agony. The world was a blind pain that blotted out even her instinct of self-preservation.

“ I saw it in the paper just now—I had no idea ! So sudden ! Why, she was visiting here the other day, was she not ? Poor woman ! I have known her for many years.” His very real concern was apparent in his shocked tone.

“ *Her ?* ” repeated Lena, turning her face to him suddenly with her burning eyes fixed on his. She rose up and stood before him, that awful face directly in his view, and her dry lips working. “ What—do—you—mean ? ”

“ Why, Madame Le Marchant, of course. It is in the paper. ‘ Suddenly, of influenza.’ Good Heavens, Lena, what is the matter with you ? ”

She looked at him still, the unnatural look fading out of her face, and suddenly her strength gave way, and she leaned against the piano shaking as if with palsy. •

“ I thought—you meant—Roudy ! ” she said

below her breath, her piteous eyes looking beyond him, forgetful of his presence. •

The dawning surprise of some days ago came back tenfold in Lord Roudenham's expression. A swift shock flashed over his face; he drew back as though he had been struck, and looked at his wife. She had bowed her head on her arms, and was crying with the abandonment of a child, the sobs making her quiver helplessly. He turned suddenly and went out of the room, returning in a few minutes with some sal-volatile and smelling salts.

"You had better sit down, Lena," he said quietly. "The hot weather is making you hysterical. Drink this, and smell your salts. I will send your maid to you."

He watched her gravely for a minute or so, but as soon as the crying grew quieter he went away again, and sent her maid. Lena accepted the girl's help and lay down on her own bed; she was too exhausted either to think or realise anything.

Lord Roudenham did not speak of the matter further. They sent cards of condolence to The Acacias, and Lena did not even think of any explanation of what she had done. She had grown reckless. Roudy wrote a day or so later to thank her for her invitation, and to say that he did not expect to get to town for the present. As she put down the letter, she met Lord Roudenham's eyes fixed on her strangely.

"Is that from my godson? I thought I knew his handwriting," he said.

"Yes," she answered briefly.

"Is he about again?" •

"No, he does not expect to come to town for the present."

Silence fell between them for a few minutes.

"I am thinking of leaving town before the end of

the session, Lena," he said quietly. "This enervating weather-is not good for you, and I do not want to send you to the Towers by yourself."

She looked up quickly. "But you cannot leave. You must stay for your party—it is important."

"Even my party must give way to my wife's health."

"I am not ill. I feel quite well. I should prefer to stay in town."

She rose from the breakfast table and walked over to the window, her heart beating anxiously. She could not go—yet.

Lord Roudenham followed her and stood beside her. "I think of leaving town next week," he said again. "You can be ready by then, I am sure." He spoke with his inevitable courtesy and consideration.

She turned and faced him. "Why?" she said defiantly.

"I think," he answered slowly, "that you need a change. And it would be best for us to get away."

The husband and wife looked into each other's eyes steadily, and measured their strength.

"Of course if you wish it!" she said calmly, sweeping past him in her usual graceful manner which had no hurry in it. "I will tell Julie—I have no doubt I shall be ready."

He did not answer. His eyes were on the dusty Park as hers had been on a former occasion, and he saw, unseeing, the weary world without go drifting by, with a motion as tireless as Time's.

Lena was filled with a cold, fierce anger. She hated Lord Roudenham with a hatred as entirely beyond her control as her love for Roudy, because he stood in the way of her passionate longing to see the cripple again. She could not realise that

she might leave London without their meeting, and perhaps that months would pass before they were face to face again. Yet as the days went on and he did not come a desperate hunted feeling pursued her. Her face grew thinner, and her voice was more often stirred out of its repose. She had lost her lifeless statuesque appearance, and her eyes were never now without expression. Her colour came and went more frequently also; hitherto she had not been wont to flush or pale, but now a chance word or sound would send the tell-tale blood to her face and transform her to the glowing rose for the moment. Whatever the future held for her, the past and present had wrought a change in Lena which no after calm would ever quite efface.

She wrote again to Roudy before the end. It was a brief note, merely stating that they left London for the Continent on such a date, but it struck a truer note of despair than the last. It required no answer; and the days fled away and brought none.

A new fear began to possess Lena suddenly. Roudy had been very ill—suppose he died while she was abroad? Again the helplessness of her position stung her like a poisonous snake. She writhed under it, and seemed to see the grin of Fate which mocked her with the shadow of such a possibility. She constructed and abandoned twenty wild schemes for making Ella's acquaintance and throwing herself on the girl's mercy. Ella was quick and generous; she would write or telegraph if he were ill. Then the educated horror of betraying an unlicensed feeling, which guards all respected women, rose up to stay her, and she felt a momentary relief that she had not taken such an irredeemable step.

So the days went on, and the alternate moods of abandonment to her own feelings, and a brief

reaction, swayed Lena between recklessness and passive endurance. She sat and watched her maid packing her trunks, with a feeling that each thing placed in them put her further off from her brief dream of human bliss. And still she craved for it, and her heart turned back to the past months lingeringly, dwelling more desperately on each word and incident as they faded more surely into distance.

It was through Lord Roudenham that she heard of the disposal of Madame Le Marchant's property.

"I am inclined to think that she was correct," he said solemnly. "She was a woman with really remarkable brains and business talents, and she saw clearly and reasonably where another might have been misled by a false sense of proportion—or—er—a misconception of justice." Lord Roudenham was unconsciously gliding into a portion of his unfinished speech, and floundered vaguely among the sentences.

"Anyhow her property was her own to do as she liked with," Lena remarked with weary satire. "It would hardly alter her will whether we approved or no."

"She stated to her brother that she considered it more important to provide for the one who could not provide for himself," her husband went on, without noticing that she winced. "Roudenham has reached an age when it is best for a man to be independent, and it seems a wise plan which enables him to live more as he pleases, to—to get away from his home circle, in fact, if inclination leads him. He is a clever fellow," Lord Roudenham added simply, "at times quite brilliant. I sometimes think clever men are not to be envied. There is a responsibility resting on them for the use of their talents, and too often the brain overbalances the judgment."

Lena looked up at him with reluctant acknowledgment. He was generous where a man with quicker wits might have been spiteful, and she accorded him a certain gratitude. If he had decried his godson she felt that he would have lowered himself.

The day before that on which they left London came with unexpected swiftness. It seemed to Lena to flash out of dozens of useless yesterdays which had passed in no settled order, yet here was to-day suddenly—the last day that murdered hope, already holding to-morrow by the hand when the world should grow dark for a season. She looked at the full trunks, and observed the air of elation about her maid, wondering why she herself had grown indifferent. Even suffering has its boundary; when one can feel no more there is no more to fear. Julie was glad that they were going away sooner than was expected; she hated Town when everyone was leaving; it began to look autumnal, and like a true Southerner she would fain follow the sun. Lena heard her singing a little French song as she worked, when her mistress was supposed to be out of hearing, and found herself humming it also against her will—for it was one of her own songs that the girl had caught up.

“ Rappelle-toi, lorsque les destinées
M'auront de toi pour jamais séparé.
Quand le chagrin, l'exil, et les années
Auront flétri ce cœur désespéré;
Songe à mon triste amour, songe à l'adieu suprême!
L'absence ni le temps ne sont rien quand on aime.
Tant que mon cœur battra,
Toujours il te dira :
Rappelle-toi.”

She wandered into her own room restlessly once during the evening, and found Julie doing the last

little trifles which always crop up at the end. The girl's face was bright and pleasant, and Lena was alone, for Lord Roudenham had gone to the House. She sat down for a minute and watched her.

"You are glad to get away, Julie?"

"Oh, yes, m'lady! London is so hot and exhausting! Do you not feel it so yourself?"

"It is rather enervating."

"And the Ledo is so charming! So gay and bright and full of people! I am so glad it is to the Ledo we go."

"Yes, you enjoyed it last year. What is that on the dressing-table?"

"Ah, pardon! How stupid of me to forget. It is a letter. It came just now after you finished dinner, and White brought it up thinking you were here. I thought you had had it."

Lena leaned forward and took the letter from her hand. It was from Roudenham Lipscombe.

"I am writing to wish you good-bye," wrote Roudy, "as I cannot come myself. You will have heard of my aunt's bequest to me, and perhaps it may interest you to know how it will affect me in the future. I have bought a house not far from here, and am setting up housekeeping for myself. This last attack has shown me that I am not so strong as I thought, and I shall be apt to let business slide and live the life of a hermit. My father will not find me necessary when he takes Wilfred into partnership, so I can become as unsociable as I please in my Moated Grange. I should like to thank both you and Lord Roudenham for all your kindness to me, but my debt stands out beyond thanks.

"This is a real good-bye, is it not, as by the time you are in England again I shall be buried deep in

my retreat, and who knows whether it may be possible to exhume me again? I take your memory with me.

“ROUDENHAM LIPSCOMBE.”

Lena looked at the signature for a minute, remembering a secret pleasure she had taken of late in her title because it was his name also. Then she put the letter into the envelope again, and turning calmly to Julie asked a question about the packing. Her face was in the shadow, but she put her hand up as if to shade her eyes for a moment; the reflection in the looking-glass had shown her a face like a dead woman's, and she mechanically shrouded it.

She slept calmly that night, a deep strange sleep of exhaustion, but at five o'clock the next morning she awoke, and finding that she could sleep no more she rose and threw a wrap round her shoulders. Her bare feet made no sound on the floor; she crossed the drawing-room and drew aside the blind from the window. The sun was up, and was shining more clearly than he would do later in the day; there was a fresher feeling in the air, and the Green Park looked cool and less parched at this time in the morning. Under the trees at the curbstone stood a tramp, bolt upright, but fast asleep. He had learned to sleep standing, for there was less chance of observance by the police. When the Park gates were opened another man came sauntering out; he had eluded the keepers and spent his night there. The two began to talk, their voices coming up so plainly to Lena at the open window that she could almost hear the words. There was hardly any traffic as yet; a few market carts, or a small trap, and a night cab crawling home. That was all. She looked at them all in turn, wondering what it felt

like to sleep upright or to have no bed but a seat in the Park. It did not matter much. All life was inevitable, and death lay at the end. She pushed her thoughts on restlessly, trying not to realise that her more vivid life had come to an end. But in the background of her mind she was still conscious, with an emphasis and distinction that would not be avoided, that she had escaped doing something terrible—that she was saved from a step which she could never have retrieved, and that she was not glad. She was only mad with regret for the thing—even the suffering—she had lost. For there are joys that are of earth alone; they will lie just beyond our reach in Hell to make Hell possible, and though we stormed Heaven we should certainly not find them there.

CHAPTER XV

“ The heart asks pleasure first,
And then, excuse from pain;
And then, those little anodynes
That deaden suffering.

“ And then, to go to sleep;
And then, if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor,
The liberty to die.”

—EMILY DICKINSON

The Doctor was a friend of Roudy's, which made his task the more painful to him. Nevertheless, as an honest man he felt the warning must be given, however it might be taken. He contrived, however, that his visit should appear more personal than professional, and, though he was closeted with his late patient for the best part of an hour, its purport

did not dawn upon the rest of the family, and Roudy thanked him.

"I have expected it for some time, you know," he said. "And there is no need to alter anything—except that I shall make my will."

"I think you ought to let them know," said the Doctor. "I have spoken plainly to you; but you can break it to your mother as gently as you see fit."

"There is no immediate danger, you say?" said Roudy thoughtfully.

"There is always immediate danger in cases like yours; and, on the other hand, you may outlive every member of the family."

"I will think it over," said Roudy quietly. "I do not myself think that a merciful Providence will grant me the Order of Release at present."

"It depends on yourself a great deal. Such insanity as staying out all night in a damp field——"

"I am not ever likely to repeat it. Every man is mad once in his life." Even as he spoke he saw a long pier glass and two figures reflected in it. The pitiless contrast between them was always before his inmost mind. It was that reflection in the looking-glass that had shown him his own insanity; he was not likely to forget it, impressed on his intelligence as it had been through the long, bitter hours of a chill night.

"It was the worst thing you could have done for rheumatic weakness. By the way, you are not thinking of living alone in this place you have bought?" said the Doctor sharply.

"No," said Roudy quietly. He thought of the housekeeper he had engaged; but the Doctor, not unnaturally, supposed that one of his sisters would

live with him. When you have just warned a patient that he has rheumatism of the heart, and is threatened with pernicious anæmia, you do not expect him to go away by himself with the risk of these diseases already heavy upon him. There were other complications in the case, too, and Roudy knew them; but Ella and Madame Le Marchant had erred in one word that they had used in reference to him. "Roudy wants his life to himself," they had said; but it was his death that Roudy wanted to himself, when it should be granted him.

Roudy made his will, and left Crooked House and the income he had but just inherited to Ella, as Madame Le Marchant had foreseen that he would; but the place was ready for its present owner by the end of October, principally owing to his personal superintendence, and Roudy took possession. His own personal property was drafted away from The Acacias, and Madame Le Marchant's from Battersea, and Ella came and went between the two houses, putting in order and clearing up, too busy to appear sad. Only, when there was no one by, big bright tears fell on the covers of Roudy's books, which she packed so carefully, and at last the sight of the long roof-room almost dismantled made her rush away to her own domain and bury her face in her own pillows to stifle the storm of crying which she could fight down no longer, though she foresaw no greater shadow of parting than the space between her present home and his future one.

But The Acacias without Roudy! Meals unlightened by being kept on tenterhooks by his mischievous moods, or joining by tacit consent in an irregular warfare against Wilfred's and Millicent's domineering spirits; long days during which there

was no looking forward to the sunset hour when he should come home and find her curled up in his arm-chair, for the refuge of Roudy's room was no more; nights too when she would not listen sleepily for the sound of his crutches going down the corridor, the last thing of which she was conscious as she fell asleep. Not one word of repining or reproach passed Ella's lips, and she worked cheerfully to get Crooked House habitable, though her own disaster lay therein.

There was one piece of property which Madame left of which Roudy saw fit to dispose. This was the parrot. He did not want another pet, and Mrs. Lipscombe had long promised herself a cat as soon as Bogey should be safely out of the house, so Polly was not welcome at The Acacias either. It was Ella's suggestion that finally located him at Mon Désir, and Miss Vaughan received this addition to her household with unfeigned delight. It added quite another interest to her life; she taught the bird to call her Cecilia, without any sense of the ridiculous in doing so—"It is so rarely now that anyone uses my Christian name," she said wistfully—and she lavished her starved affections upon him, to which he made a most ungrateful return by coming out with indiscreet remarks on all possible occasions. Ella took a wicked delight in teaching him under the rose, the result of which lessons he generally reproduced on the rare occasions when Miss Vaughan had visitors, to the alarm of his owner. It certainly did look like a coincidence that on the memorable occasion when Beatrice brought Wilfred to call—a day for ever set apart in Miss Vaughan's memory—the parrot should suddenly exclaim, "I congratulate you, my dears! When is it to be?" and begin to whistle the "Wedding March," declining to stop

until his cage was covered over. Miss Vaughan could not imagine where he had learned it, and was covered with confusion.

There was little else in the flat at Battersea which was not removed straight to Crooked House, to Ella's great satisfaction.

"I am so glad you have kept all Aunt Fee's furniture," she said heartily as she arranged the rooms according to Roudy's directions. "I should have hated the dear old things to be sold. What a jolly little divan that is! It always makes me think of Turks and long pipes and things. Where shall I put the armchair, Roudy?"

"Up in that corner there—what are you doing with the one that used to be in my room?"

"That's mine—you know I always sit in it, and as you have the other one now that fits your back better you won't want it. I shall put it this side, opposite yours, and if anyone dares to take it when I'm here out they come in double quick time!"

"Mack always sits there when he is in England," remarked Roudy sweetly.

"Does he!" said Ella, with a faint grimace at the photo over the chimney-piece. "Well, he'll find himself chucked this time, unless I absent myself entirely when he is over—as I suspect I should do."

"No, you wouldn't. This house is going to be a haven of refuge to you from the characteristics of the family. There is nothing harder to put up with than the advanced characteristics of other people, and nothing more delightful than one's own. Push the piano further in against the wall, Ella."

"Is it to stop here?"

"Certainly."

"But, Roudy, I thought this was the dining-room."

"Do you think the piano will be insulted if I take my meals in its presence?"

"No—only—it seems wrong somehow," Ella said, looking round her in a rather bewildered fashion. "And yet I don't know—it is nice, too, Roudy."

The room was long and low, somewhat after the shape of Roudy's room at The Acacias. It faced the road, but the poplar trees stood between it and the highway and threw a dancing shadow to and fro. At sunset the latticed windows of the old house caught the light and glimmered like jewels through the trees. The room which Ella called the dining-room was floored with red tiles, but they were nearly covered with skin rugs—Cape goat, and the commoner grey goat, leopard, and bear. The window seats were broad and cushioned, and the hearth had a real old-fashioned chimney corner with an oak settle. The room was panelled halfway, and on the upper portion of the walls hung a goodly number of oil paintings. The piano stood at the further end of the room near the door, and in the centre was an oak table, dark with rubbing and polishing, for Madame had kept her furniture as the apple of her eye.

"I'm so glad all your chairs are easy chairs," Ella remarked in a tone of satisfaction. "Whenever I see straight-backed chairs in a room it always looks to me as though people expected their enemies to see them rather than their friends. Rooms with Louis Quinze furniture, or Early Victorian suites, resemble a torture chamber."

"I must give a house-warming," said Roudy whimsically as he looked round him. "An afternoon tea-party, I think."

"Well, you've got a teacloth, at all events," Ella replied, with a significant nod. "What a fuss Beatrice did make about working that thing! First

she said she must finish knitting Wilfred's tie—and then there was something she wanted to make for mother—and in the end she took more time and trouble over your cloth than anything else, 'I believe.'"

"I think she works very nicely," said Roudy serenely. "I liked her contribution to my house-keeping very much."

He smiled a little, as though at a memory that amused him. Perhaps he knew as no one else did what pangs of conscience, and what secret experiences, had been worked into the cloth in question.

Every female member of the family had assisted in furnishing or upholstering Crooked House. Mrs. Lipscombe had marked all the house linen, Agnes had made the cushions—and Roudy's desire for cushions was unlimited—Millicent had undertaken the curtains, and had tried to persuade Roudy to loop them up with silk scarves of a particularly dubious shade of sage green, which he gravely assured her would make Bogey seriously ill.

"If you ask Mrs. Deane nicely, Ella, I think she might make us some tea," Roudy remarked after a while. He had kept the caretaker as a combination of housekeeper and cook, "to look after his morals," he said, finding that she would be deprived of her means of livelihood by his purchase of the house, and also that she was excellent in the kitchen. She was a thin and very silent person, who attended on Roudy as though he had been a little child, and seemed to regard both him and his strange pet as beings too unusual to be classed in any known order. If a gnome had asked her to enter his service and had brought a three-headed dog with him she would have treated the situation with the same unquestioning helplessness as she did Roudy.

When first introduced to her Bogey made himself flat, in his usual manner of approaching strangers, after which he went for her ankles as though until now he had never found his favourite food. When detached he scolded everybody all round, chattering like a monkey, and not until Roudy picked him up by the scruff of his neck and shook him did he understand that Mrs. Deane was one of the family, and might only be bitten at rare intervals when Mere-Kat emotions grew too strong for training. Then he retired into a corner and growled, telling himself all about it, and gradually subsiding to a noise exactly like the quack of an angry duck. There was hardly a bird note his own did not resemble in some mood; his ordinary conversation was rather like a hen's, and he could coo like a wood pigeon when he wanted to coax, and even give a little trill like a singing bird's. When strangers saw him behind the safe bars of his cage, and he made these softer sounds because he wanted to get out, they were apt to be deluded into thinking him the prettiest and sweetest of pets, but once his cage door was open the chances were that he put them to open rout. Fortunately Mrs. Deane had had a son who kept ferrets, and she was not thrown into the chronic state of terror with which Bogey inspired the world at large.

Ella went off in search of tea, and returned with the tray herself. Roudy had not moved when she came back, he was still sitting in his armchair, staring into the cheerful little fire which was burning on the wide hearth. It was getting dusk, and the firelight threw Roudy's shadow on the wall behind him, still more distorted and hunchbacked than the original.

"How pretty the room looks now!" Ella said, pausing in sudden pleasure and admiration. "You

might be a wonderful old fairy, Roudy, leaning over the fire like that, and this your enchanted cottage in a wood."

"And you are the wandering Princess, whom the wicked stepmother has turned out, and I have taken in as my servant. And by and by the Prince will ride past——"

"After I have done all the impossible tasks, and spun flax into gold! What will the Prince be like?"

The firelight danced up and down, and illumined the portrait of Roudy's friend over the mantelshef. For one startled moment it seemed to Ella as though Mack were looking straight at her. She started, and put down the tray hastily.

"Perhaps he will come riding on a koodoo," said Roudy, without raising his eyes from the fire. "And there will be an ostrich feather in his hat."

"Oh, Roudy! But I would so much rather that it should be you who should turn into the Prince!"

"I am no Prince, child. I am only the old and wicked fairy, you know."

"I didn't say you were wicked, Roudy. I think you would be a good fairy, only in disguise."

"The disguise always seems to me to rather cancel the goodness."

"And what part would Bogey play? Would he turn into anything?"

"No, Bogey is Bogey from first to last. He would only—bite the Prince!"

Ella's eyes were still resting on Mack's likeness, and her face was rather wistful and serious as she sat down to pour out the tea.

It was their first meal in Crooked House, and an irregular one at that; Roudy was going to have his dinner there, however, and spend his first night

under his own roof. Leaving him behind brought back the change to Ella more really than ever before, and she lingered on and on, helping to wash up the tea-things, and talking lightly and restlessly, after all necessity for her remaining was past. It was nearly dark when she took up her little fur cap and put it on her head at last, carelessly indifferent to the effect of her rough dark hair curling up against it in a pretty wilful fashion of its own. Ella was quite appreciative of her own picturesqueness if she happened to think of it, but half the time her active brain was too absorbed in a dozen different schemes to remember what she looked like, until some flash of silent admiration in the eyes which met hers would make her blush with sudden consciousness and shy indignation.

Roudy came to the door with her to say good-bye, and stood in the porch while she ran down to the narrow gate between the poplar trees. It was a chilly evening, and the fiery sunset had left a line of crimson across the sky, like a deep wound in the mass of grey clouds low down in the west, as though the sun, like a traitor, had turned as he went and stabbed the advancing night. There was a wind playing in the poplar leaves, making a whispering sound that came at intervals with pauses between. The tall trees stood up dark against a far cold background of sky, and the old house in the midst of them leaned to one side like a traveller halting upon his staff. Ella looked back from the gate and saw Roudy leaning on his crutches in the porch, like a human reproduction of the house. Her bright face was towards him for a moment as she latched the gate—he saw it through the iron bars—she nodded again and vanished like the last gleam of the sunlight. She had nodded with intention that the last

glimpse of her might be gay and cheerful; what he could not know, she thought, was that the gleam in her eyes was tears, and that they fell like jewels on to her hand as she brushed it hastily across her eyes.

Her way home lay through a poor district, which had once been fashionable, but many years ago, to judge from the air of decayed gentility about the big houses, which had grown to have a forlorn appearance and fallen out of repair. Crooked House was about a mile from The Acacias, and just far enough out in the suburbs to make the fight between town and country woefully apparent. A little stream ran by the side of the road part of the way; it was hardly more than a ditch, but the running water slipped fast over the stones with a sound of irresistible force, though it spoke in a whisper. It was running away—running away—always running past. Ella felt as though she were walking against it, pushing with every onward step; it was only a fancy, but it seemed to her an omen of the inevitable barriers which she would have to break down if she took her fate into her own hands and compassed her desire. For her passion for the Stage was not abandoned, it was only waiting while she thought, as she had told Roudy. He had opened her eyes to the weight of opposition she must meet with, and the moral upheaval it must make in the family before she carried out her intention. "To be thoroughly selfish you must be very strong," he had told her. As she pushed in imagination against the water she felt as though she were measuring her strength. And still, though she thought earnestly, she did not know the limits of her own powers. Only of one thing was she certain just now—that she was going back to The Acacias alone, and that Roudy's room was dark and empty—as tenantless as though he were dead. Poor

Ella! She threw up her head with impatient scorn of herself, but the sensitive face was almost tragic as she went homewards, with her light step as unfaltering and swift as ever.

On the doorstep of The Acacias she came up with her father, who was only just down from town. He was putting his latchkey into the door as Ella appeared.

"Is that you, Baby?" he said, turning round.

"I will let you in. Where have you been?"

"I have just come home from Crooked House."

"Ah, yes. Roudy takes up his residence there to-day, doesn't he? So you left him behind?"

"Yes."

He had opened the door, and the light in the hall lit up the two faces. At the moment Ella saw a swift likeness to Roudy, and turning to him lifted her face to be kissed impulsively. Gabriel Lipscombe was not a man who made favourites in his family; his experience had warned him otherwise. But he was observant nevertheless. He put his arm round Ella and held her silently, pushing the hair back from her forehead with a touch which his wife did not know, and certainly would not have comprehended. Ella was comforted without knowing why; she had a feeling that somebody else missed Roudy, and that she and her father were allies. She turned away without speaking, however, as the drawing-room door opened and Mrs. Lipscombe appeared with her knitting in her hands.

"So you are down at last, Gabriel," she said placidly. ("One, two, three, plain—one, two, three, pearl"); I am afraid dinner will be a little late to-night, for they turned off all the water this afternoon for some reason. (Dear me! I hope I haven't dropped a stitch!) Isn't it tiresome? You really

ought to write to the company." Then she saw Ella. "Run and take your hat off quickly, dear," she said. "Duke is here, and Millie wants to have some music before dinner."

By and by Mr. Lipscombe heard the opening bars of a well-known air played gently, as though the accompanist were weary, and two lusty young voices joining in, in canon :

"My true love hath my heart,
And I—and I have his——"

and contrary to his usual custom he entered the drawing-room, and instead of going to sleep sat and watched the performers.

Roudy turned and went back into the house slowly as the gate closed after Ella. His crutches made a sharp click on the tiles of his sitting-room, and Bogey rolled up out of a sound sleep and began to investigate the room afresh. He was tolerably familiar with every corner of it by now, but his interest did not seem to diminish. Roudy sat down in the armchair, which he drew up beside the table, and Bogey scrambled into the fender and over the fireirons. Then he sat up before the fire like a miniature kangaroo to warm himself, his long wiry tail, which he sat, sticking up in front of him, and the fireirons forming an impromptu armchair, upon which he leaned one paw to balance himself. It was very quiet in the room, and dark save for the firelight; Mrs. Deane was at the back of the house in her own domains, and the place seemed full of a grave silence.

Roudy was absolutely thinking at the moment that he would have many more meals in that room with Ella, and recalling her eager face and ruffled hair as it had been so lately opposite him and when he

parted from her at the gate. He had said good-bye to her, but he had not meant good-bye. Ella was by no means outside his scheme of life; if he found it good for them both he would have her here with him at Crooked House, instead of leaving her behind him at The Acacias. The instinct to plan for a future which is in all human nature was upon Roudy in the first impetus of his new position as householder. Yes, certainly he and Ella would be very happy here.

Something made him turn his head just then and catch sight of the Mere-Kat sitting up like a little old man before the fire, warming himself. He might have been the demon of the hearth as he turned his flat pointed head sharply round to Roudy, save that in his wide dark eyes there was the expression of all captured animals who dream of freedom—the same look that haunts the eyes of the big is at the Zoo, lying behind their iron bars and gazing away to a desert of memory beyond the vacant faces staring in at them. For a moment Bogey looked out to a veld seen by him alone, then he turned back to the fire with a truly cynical philosophy. It was not an African sun, but it was nice and hot. The action was so significant, and his attitude so poignant, that Roudy laughed, his shoulders shaking with his amusement. Then, without more premeditation than he had looked at Bogey, he looked round the room. It was empty save for him and his strange pet. He felt suddenly that he was alone, and a memory that he had said he would take with him rose up to emphasise the loneliness. The strength of his manhood surged over him with its insatiable demands, and the battle that he had won seemed as though it must be fought all over again, hampered as he was, too, physically by the fatigue of

the past few days. There was a strange spasm at his heart—whether mental or physical he hardly knew—a feeling of overpowering, awful pain that made him stagger to his feet and stand swaying for a moment without his crutches. For the space of three painful breaths he stood upright as he had never done through his life, a large helpless figure held erect by its own agony—then he sank down slowly into his chair, threw his arms out upon the table with a movement as if of protest, and dropped his head down on them. . . .

The Mere-Kat turned his head restlessly, glancing with bird-like eyes at the crooked figure which had fallen loosely against the table; but it had ceased to move. The Order of Release had come with unexpected mercy.

